Masking

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/43755520.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Superman - All Media Types, Batman - All Media Types
Relationships:	Clark Kent/Bruce Wayne, Clark Kent & Bruce Wayne
Characters:	Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne, Alfred Pennyworth, Jason Todd, Lois Lane, Dick Grayson, Diana (Wonder Woman), Flash, Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Autistic Bruce Wayne, neurodivergent Clark Kent?, autistic masking, Bad coping mechanisms, Hurt/Comfort, Flagrant misuse of punctuation, Clark Kent hates truck nuts, Wikipedia contributor Clark Kent, Author refuses to write fight scenes, No really I hope you aren't here for any action scenes, It's just some superheroes with special interests, Extremely low stakes adventures, No Batkid angst, Minor Injuries, as a plot device just way too many times, city life as seen by a country boy, Fluff, Falling In Love, Friendship, Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, Kryptonite, Getting Together, they trust each other so much, Not Beta Read, Mutual Pining, but not with the angst that usually comes with mutual pining, It's much more calm
Language:	English
Collections:	forgiveness (can you imagine?), So Dang Good Recs
Stats:	Published: 2022-12-22 Completed: 2023-01-03 Words: 33,935 Chapters: 13/13

Masking

by BombusBombus

Summary

Then he took a deep breath and he *changed*. He ironed out every fold in his posture and his face until he looked like Superman again. His shoulders were broad, his gaze was confident, and his smile showed no sign of embarrassment or fear.

It’s genuinely uncomfortable to watch.

Especially since Bruce *knows* that change. He’s seen it in the mirror before entering parties or nightclubs. He’s always referred to it, internally, as 'putting on my better face.' The façade is his least favourite part of the day, ranking just below 'getting punched by supervillains.'

The idea that Superman is just Kal's better face, that would explain a lot.

It would also mean Bruce isn't alone.

Notes

I wrote this in the month surrounding finals while I was running a fever and my brain was soup and I had an extreme fixation on the parallels between Clark Kent and Batman. This fic plays fast and loose with any solid sense of canon because accuracy is difficult with brain soup.
Also, this is my first time posting so I appreciate feedback on any potential faux pas.

Chapter 1

It starts with a bomb. A bomb full of kryptonite, because the other kinds of bombs are usually not a huge deal when you're on the moon. But this bomb hit Superman hard enough to warrant a full day of bedrest, which means Kal is lying on his infirmary bed in the watchtower, surrounded by sunlamps and using his unstoppable charm to hammer away at the immovable object of Bruce’s isolation.

"I'm on my deathbed. Make smalltalk with me."

"You aren't on your deathbed."

"And neither are you, thanks to me"

Bruce can tell a desperate ploy for conversation when he sees it. His instinct is not to rise to the bait.

Unfortunately (as usual), cooperating will probably take less energy than saying no to those puppy dog eyes.

So he sighs loudly and lowers himself onto the chair beside the bed. It creaks beneath him; it looks like one of the metal legs snapped off at some point and someone extremely strong mashed it back on like two pieces of wet clay. *Why does nobody else around here make note of malfunctioning equipment?*

(He catches the guilty glance Kal throws the chair, but ignores it).

He isn't throwing Kal a bone. Smalltalking the Batman is like lifting dead weight, and he knows it. Unfortunately, Kal has the social equivalent of super strength. *And he always wears that same goddamn smile* .

"Tell me about something!"

Silence.

"Like something you're interested in. Sports. Whatever you do in your free time."

"What I do in my free time."

"Yeah! Or just something you're interested in, y'know? Something you think about for fun!"

"You're just like Flash." Bruce grinds out.

Questions about Bruce's free time are his least favourite. They always end with disbelief that *Batman* of all people doesn't have normal hobbies.

"Oh come on."

"I don't do things for fun."

"Well you do *something* in your spare time, right?"

"I review footage and maintain my equipment."

"Really? Come on!"

There it is .

"Not everything is about fun."

"Well yeah, but you can have hobbies that aren't all about fun. I do."

"Like what."

A pause. Kal is obviously thrown off by the sudden change of focus.

Bruce smirks. "go on, tell me about these hobbies of yours."

"I edit Wikipedia articles" Kal mumbles, embarrassed but defensive.

"Wikipedia."

"Yeah."

"The one with the misinformation?"

Suddenly Kal is sitting up straight, with a look of outrage that Bruce had only seen before in the presence of villainy.

"What gives you that idea?"

"Robin" he lies. The truth is, he doesn't trust *anything* he didn't research firsthand. Any encyclopaedia is inherently biased.

"But you've used it before, right?"

"I am familiar with its function."

"Have you *used* it, though."

"...I have digital access to state of the art institutions and a search engine that I programmed myself. Why would I need to crowdsource my research."

"Aha! So we agree that elitism and privilege affect access to information!"

"...Yes." He *does* agree, though this definitely qualifies as misdirection.

Kal settles into an expression of earnest concern and begins talking quickly. "The reputation of misinformation is largely due to a mistrust of crowdsourced information, which would be more valid if the demographic of editors actually reflected the overall demographics of the internet."

Something is different about him. He’s slouching, making less eye contact and shuffling the hem of his blanket between his hands. He’s also using bigger words than Superman ever uses. It’s fascinating to watch, like a *sabella* worm unfurling to feed.

Bruce realises too late that he’s staring, so he squints to signify interest. Not that the signifier is very useful, because Kal keeps his eyes fixed on the drip of the IV bag about two feet to the left of Bruce.

"Wikipedia editors work very hard and have a LOT of arguments just to maintain neutral and accurate information on each subject. A great deal of deliberation goes on behind the scenes and new edits are very quick to be…"

Bruce is fairly comfortable with Kal, which means he relaxes in ways wouldn't normally consider acceptable. He has also been awake for over 40 hours, so he's having a lot of trouble focusing on the man's monologue.

You can review the surveillance footage later , he tells himself, accepting the permission to quietly disengage. The infirmary is warm, the light is soft, and the familiar voice lulls him into relaxation.

When he wakes up, there’s a blanket over him and the infirmary is empty.

Later, when watching the infirmary recordings, Bruce feels stupid.

"Oh," Kal winced when he realized Bruce was asleep, with an uncharacteristic hunch of his shoulders. "Sorry."

Then he took a deep breath and he *changed* . He ironed out every fold in his posture and his face until he looked like Superman again. His shoulders were broad, his gaze was confident, and his smile showed no sign of embarrassment or fear.

And he went to sleep like that. It’s genuinely uncomfortable to watch.

Especially since Bruce *knows* that change. He’s seen it in the mirror before entering parties or nightclubs. He’s always referred to it, internally, as 'putting on my better face.' The façade is his least favourite part of the day, ranking just below 'getting punched by supervillains.'

The idea that Superman is just Kal's better face, that would explain a lot. Bruce has seen the interviews. Kal can be impulsive or stupid, but he’s always *on,* especially on camera. An answer here or there might be bland, or avoidant, when prying into his personal life. It makes sense when he doesn’t *have* a personal life, sure, but…

This is too much unfounded speculation. Bruce needs more data, but he *isn't supposed to pry* .

So he doesn't! He doesn't track Superman's movements, he doesn't monitor Superman's internet access aboard the watchtower, and he doesn't pry into private conversations that make their way onto camera footage! He should get a goddamn MEDAL for his restraint.

And the rest is fair game, right? Body language analysis isn't invasive, anyone can look at body language. Anyone can notice the little ways that Kal relaxes at the end of a mission when he doesn't have to be Superman quite as much.

Watching and rewatching old footage, Bruce discovers a completely different demeanour slipping through in moments of excitement or relaxation. There's a duck of the head here, a shuffle of the feet there, and his fingers are always skimming along the edge of whatever they can reach. Sometimes they trace the lines of his own broad hands in careful swoops that would look like an anxious gesture to an outside observer, but Bruce has played and replayed the footage enough to see the idle deftness in each repetitive movement. He replicates the gesture in his own hands, wondering what it would feel like to-

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"Don't say fuck." he responds automatically, moving his hands back up to his keyboard. He can see Jason's approaching reflection in the monitor that isn't playing Kal's hand motions.

"Well it looks like you're doing something creepy again. What did we say about research?"

"If it would make your family uncomfortable to know you looked it up, you shouldn't look it up" intones Bruce, only half paying attention. This isn't creepy. At least, Kal wouldn't find it creepy, and that's the important part. He isn't violating any boundaries.

"Why are you all zoomed in on Supe's hands??"

"Body language analysis. Not the pseudoscience. Just comparisons."

"And what did Wonder Woman tell you about stalking your teammates?"

Hold up . Bruce turns around to meet Jason's gaze, donning a raised eyebrow. "And how do you know what Wonder Woman might tell me?"

"That's not the point!"

"Now it is."

Jason rolls his eyes, "because I looked on your computer. Your team roster has little notes at the bottom making passive aggressive jabs at Wonder Woman about privacy."

"Why were you looking at the roster."

"Because I was curious and I figured you'd already stalked your teammates."

"Smart kid." Bruce mutters.

Jason smirks and lumbers off to lift weights. The kid is in the middle of a growth spurt and he's well on his way to being built like a tank. Bruce gets back to work.

And that's that.

Except it isn't, because Bruce can't turn off his goddamn brain.

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"Hey, I was thinking about our conversation the other day!" is the first thing he hears from a blazing sunbeam of a smile when he arrives (early) to their next briefing. There's nobody else in the conference room, so he lets his guard down just a little, relaxing (as much as he's capable of) into his usual chair.

"Mh."

"You were talking about being Batman, remember? I feel like I invalidated your feelings."

Bruce doesn't recall having any feelings.

"I totally get having a- a special interest or something, and I know how hard you work on this, I just assumed you thought of it more like a job than a hobby."

It is a job. It's important like a job. Hobbies don't save lives , he doesn't say. It's hard to explain how important it is, so much more important than just a hobby. But if he brings it up, they'll be arguing, and Kal's voice will shift back into Superman again, and his hands will stop carefully tracing the edge of the table. So Bruce doesn't respond.

Kal leans further across the table, brows furrowing. "But being Batman IS you, right? And. Hm. I'm putting my foot in my mouth again. I mean like, the skills and the gadgets and the fighting techniques, right? They aren't just tools, they're- they're interesting to you."

Kal is all earnest eye contact. Bruce doesn't know how to respond. Every new supposition is getting more accurate.

"So I'd like to- to hear about that sometime! Maybe it wouldn't be too much like smalltalk!"

"Wanting to hear about my life sounds like smalltalk. You know how I feel about smalltalk."

"No, I-" Kal makes a small noise of frustration, aimed at himself more than anyone else. "Like, what's up with your cloak? I noticed you changed the material, why?"

Huh.

And then it’s easy, all he has to do was talk about the issues he’s had with camouflage, the tensile strength and waterproofing, then on top of that the issues with weight, the tendency to catch on things, and all the other considerations that come with creating the right fabric. And Kal smiles (a soft smile Bruce hasn't seen before), and nods, and asks lots of questions, and Bruce knows all the answers. It’s the easiest thing in the world.

…Until Green Lantern walks in the door and hears him pronouncing 'polyfluoroalkyl' correctly.

Green Lantern's eyes go wide and his smile gets wider. "Woah there, did I stumble into the smart guy conference by mistake?"

Bruce sighs, shuttering up his relaxation. Maybe he can finish telling Kal later. A cruel part of his brain thinks, *Kal doesn't want to hear more of that garbage.*

But Kal is frowning faintly, and folding his hands solidly on the table, smoothing out the creases in his posture to become Superman again.

Something inside Bruce goes bitter at the loss.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> "He's a reporter. He has a family in Kansas. He looks like he got bullied in high school. He doesn't like parties. His hands never stop moving."
>
> "That certainly doesn't sound like the Superman you've described, sir."
>
> "He's interested in all sorts of things, Alfred. I found his Wikipedia account."
>
> "Is that so."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clark Kent is a goddamn mess.

Batman takes his special interests and turns them into the most competent man in the world , he ponders, staring helplessly at the remains of his breakfast, *I can't even microwave oatmeal* .

To be fair, his microwave is on the fritz. To be even fairer, it's probably something he should have handled within a month of the problem arising. It's usually fine if he pulls the food out about ten seconds before the end, so he really doesn't need to call someone about it yet.

Not that he actually ever remembers to pull it out on time.

Clark scrapes a space out of the clutter on his coffee table to put down the oatmeal (*maybe if I add milk it won't be crunchy*) and turns his attention back to the problem that distracted him in the first place. Some guy with a glitched out username had been trying to fuck with the Gotham Wikipedia page. Clark can defend the Gotham Wikipedia page. It's the least he can do for his friend.

(He knows how stupid that is, on a logical level. He knows his sense of importance has been warped by years of editing, but he's very careful not to let that affect his actions outside of this apartment. Mostly.)

The guy hadn't been matching Wikipedia's professional, detached tone at all, and he was adding the most inane information to the page, factoids that belong more in trivia than in a

concise summary of the city. Since it's not explicit vandalism, Clark had to go about this the official way and put in multiple requests for comment. The guy was trying to argue with everyone,then finally tried to delete half the article, including the small segment on Batman. Clark is carefully undoing that now. He tends to Batman's Wikipedia presence better than he tends to the wilting window box Lois got him. (It's not weird, right? It's a way to be affectionate to someone who doesn't enjoy most forms of affection.)

Clark glances up at the clock. he has five minutes before work starts. *Crap.* Not enough time to do the human-speed chores he had slated for today (it's hard to wash the dishes at high speeds when water only flows so fast). He should really ask Batman to help make him a work laptop that can keep up with him, too. But then Batman would ask, 'why do you need a human laptop' and what does Clark say to that? Does he bring up the embarrassing Wikipedia thing again? Does he come up with something else? Would Batman infer his civilian identity from the request? He doesn't want to find out.

He rushes to work. Maybe Perry won't kill him for being late.

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Clark wishes Perry had just killed him. The whole office knows how he gets at high society stuff. They used to joke about it before his third event when Lois saw him accidentally eat a canapé with the toothpick still in.

Unfortunately, someone has tried to kill Lois the last two times she's gone to Gotham, Cat isn't available, and Perry is pissed at Clark's chronic lateness, so the upcoming auction is gonna be his.

"Come ON," Lois groans, pulling him over to a rack of identical tuxedo jackets, "Perry's letting you rent the good stuff. That's as good as an apology from him."

"None of these will fit me." Clark mumbles, desperately trying not to attract the attention of any employees. Renting a tux is a fancy thing that fancy people do to go to fancy places. Nevermind that the employees are just college students, they *know things* about being *fancy* , and they're judging Clark for NOT *knowing things* .

"Smallville. You can't go your entire life only feeling comfortable in one suit."

"I don't feel comfortable in any of my-" he narrows his eyes, "low blow, Lane."

"I'm just saying! If you can fake it in one, you can fake it in the other!"

"That's not- that's not how it works. If Clark Kent goes into a party, everyone can judge him for his flaws. The other guy doesn't have flaws."

"Yesterday you told me that tall dark and handsome chewed you out for being too reckless. Which one is it?"

"Those are FLAW flaws. I'm talking about stuff like-"

"Accidentally quoting a country pop song in an article?"

She's holding up a suit jacket to his chest, looking down at it so he can't meet her eyes to tell if she's being serious. His entire body goes cold with anxiety.

"I didn't."

She looks up with a smirk and a raised eyebrow, "But you thought you might have for a second there. Here, this jacket is the least heinous."

"I hate you so much."

"And yet I save your life every day." She replies demurely.

***

The event is loud, which is tricky when you have super hearing.

It takes a lot of concentration not to let in every clink of glassware and rustle of silk. Clark is holding his pen very, very carefully, and writing so gently that it barely leaves behind ink half the time. He's not actually writing anything important; his notepad is always a good place to hide when Clark Kent is In Public. Superman is his only social shield, and he can't be Superman right now, so he's squeezed into a table at the very back of the venue, desperately hoping nobody notices him before the auction officially begins.

A giggling couple slips into a single chair at the table next to him. They both reek of alcohol. He keeps his eyes on his scribbled notepad, ignoring the quiet moans and the increasingly energetic mouth noises. Maybe he could leave, or fake his death or something, that sounds preferable. The rest of the venue is loud and he's on the edge of something he's NOT going to call panic, because if it IS panic, he won't be able to get his scoop. And he's a professional, who *doesn't* panic, who *doesn't* eat toothpicks, and who *doesn't* use more than three safety pins on a tuxedo suit.

The couple separates. A woman's voice says something about getting more drinks. He relaxes just a bit. *See, it's already getting better* .

Clark hazards a glance towards the man at the other table. The guy absolutely looks like he belongs at this sort of party, despite the lipstick smeared across his face and the rumpled hair.

He's maybe thirty something but it's hard to tell; he's handsome in that terrifying celebrity way, like he's carved out of rock. His shirt probably costs as much as-

Clark accidentally makes eye contact. He quickly stares back at his notepad. *That wasn't a social cue, I wasn't initiating an interaction, please go away* .

A second later, the chair across from him creaks with a new occupant, because Clark Kent can't catch a goddamn break.

He doesn't look up until a hand is placed on his notepad to get his attention. Lipstick guy is sitting right there, leaning towards Clark conspiratorially, glancing over his shoulder to watch the woman go.

"I was wondering if you could help me out" he smirks, "my date has gotten a little bit too clingy."

"What." Manages Clark. *Don't look at the lipstick on his mouth, keep your eyes on his eyes to maintain eye contact, put down your pen and notepad, stay professional-*

The man leans closer, making sincere (if drunk) eye contact. "She doesn't like reporters. Can I talk to you for a while until she loses interest?"

You're allowed to say no, you can just say no, here you go saying no,

"Sure." Mutters Clark, staring down at his notepad and running a finger along the edge of his lapel. Why do weird misogynists always think he's their ally? Is there a 'yeehaw' tattoo on his forehead that makes people assume he has friends whose trucks have nuts?

"Excellent. My name is Bruce Wayne. It's a pleasure to meet you." Wayne puts out a limp hand, which Clark shakes, very carefully. It's not a trucknuts handshake, at least.

He's heard that name somewhere but recognisable names aren’t unusual at events like this. At least the anxiety of conversation is a familiar anxiety, distracting from everything else. Plus, he can't be too embarrassed in front of someone who is carefully wiping smeared lipstick off their face. *Okay*. What would Lois do?

I'd get my goddamn scoop, Smallville.

"Clark Kent, Daily Planet. How do you feel about the event so far?" He asks.

"Right down to business, I see. Good man. Let's see," -Wayne sways a little bit, and Clark wonders how drunk he really is- "I think they've got some fine champagne, some fun trinkets in the auction, and…" he leans in and winks at Clark, "some damn beautiful women, if you know what I mean."

"Beautiful enough to avoid, you mean?"

Wayne giggles and leans *even closer* (this table is very small, isn't it), and then stops short, staring at Clark's wringing hands.

"Mr. Wayne?"

Wayne doesn't respond. His face seems suddenly impassive, glancing up at Clark, who offers an encouraging smile. Or at least, it's meant to be encouraging. It's mostly anxious.

And then the ceiling explodes, which is honestly a goddamn relief.

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It *is* him. It *has* to be him. The fingers skirted the edges of his lapels in the same deft ways as they skirted the edges of a cape. His hands came up and pushed the glasses up his face instead of toying with the curl on his forehead. The foot shuffle, the shoulder hunch, it's all right there, stuffed into an XXL tuxedo jacket whose back panel has been safety-pinned to hell and back. His overall build may be the same but it's almost impossible to tell through the postural differences. If Bruce hadn't seen the hands, he wouldn't have noticed at all.

And that was a different smile he was wearing. Fascinating.

The last of the debris are still raining from the ceiling by the time Batman reaches the entrance to the hallway Bruce Wayne had fled down. He sticks close to the shadows, assessing the situation. It's not even a big villain, just some mob guys looking to steal the auction items and maybe some jewellery on the side. They probably caught the same tip he did that the painting is secretly a Van Gogh (it's not, he checked). They have guns, though. They always have guns.

He catches a glimpse of- of *Clark Kent* across the hall, staring right at him (heightened senses, definitely. Nobody else sees Batman). Maybe Bruce is too hard on Kal about restraint, because the guy is clearly fidgeting out of his skin in an attempt to remain a bystander. He looks away when he sees that Bruce has seen him. *There's the head duck, there go the hands,*

Keep your head in the game, Batman.

He doesn't look at Kent while he's resolving the situation. He doesn't look at Kent while he's helping calm the victims. He doesn't look at Kent while he's tying the last knots on the criminal's restraints. In fact, he isn't going to talk to Kent at all. He's not supposed to pry.

His resolution lasts almost all the way home.

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"I found his secret identity," Bruce tells Alfred, who comes to check on him at dawn, "I don't know what to do with it."

"I wasn't aware the man had a secret identity."

Bruce is lying under the batmobile and can't see Alfred, so maybe he's imagining the hint of disbelief.

"He's a reporter. He has a family in Kansas. He looks like he got bullied in high school. He doesn't like parties. His hands never stop moving."

"That certainly doesn't sound like the Superman you've described, sir."

"He's *interested* in all sorts of things, Alfred. I found his Wikipedia account."

"Is that so."

Bruce ignores the disapproval in Alfred's voice. "He cites his own newspaper articles constantly, it wasn't hard." The username had been 'SoupGuy,' and he had been recently active in the articles for 'Parental Care in Birds,' 'Hostile Architecture,' and 'Per- and Polyfluoroalkyl Substances.'

Bruce really can't explain why that last one gets to him like it does.

"Have you considered telling him about this discovery?"

"No, I don't even know what it means! It seems like it could be an extension of the hobby he told me about. I don't know if Clark Kent is the act or if Superman is."

"Clark Kent?" Asks Alfred, and that IS astonishment in his voice.

Bruce deftly unscrews a nozzle. "You've heard of him?"

"I believe he works with Lois Lane, a household name."

"Oh. Right. That makes sense." Lois Lane reports on Superman. It's a full circle.

"You should talk to him about your discovery. You always feel better when you two talk."

Bruce always feels better *after* he *has* talked. The act of earnest communication is an excruciating experience.

So he prepares for it in the usual way: by drawing up a plan.

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They're on monitor duty.

"I have… a question."

"Go on."

"Is your journalism a ploy for primary sources."

There's a pause. Bruce doesn't look away from the screen in front of him. Directness is always a good way to go.

"What- what journalism." Kal sounds strangled (and it is 'Kal,' still, because civilian names are a liability in a professional environment. But will it always be Kal?)

"I accidentally discovered your day job. I was curious. Is it real?."

"What? No! I mean yes! It's an actual job! A real life actual job that I am very invested in! Why were you looking at my day job???"

"But you cite your own articles on Wikipedia?"

"That's not *why* I have a job! I have a job because I- I'm a guy who has a job!"

"But you *do* use it for Wikipedia."

Kal's mouth works while he disbelievingly formulates a sentence.

"Well. Y'know, sometimes you find an area that people don't know much about." His voice is sheepish and anxious, as if he's letting Bruce in on a secret (and technically, he is). "You find gaps in public knowledge that make you curious. And when you get curious, you write a pitch for a story. And maybe your editor approves it, or maybe you… you write it freelance."

"You disgust me," quips Bruce (then, after a quick review of his tone, braces for the sarcasm to miss the mark).

Instead Kal laughs. It's high and a bit relieved *(Not a Superman laugh).* "The journalism-it's just another way to make the world a better place, y'know?"

"So is the boy scout the act, then?" Bruce hears himself asking, as the rest of his brain bustles around to inspect the new laugh.

"I… Superman? No! It's not an act, per se." Kal pauses for a moment. "But. Superman is big. He's. Huge. Not just 'saving Metropolis' but 'saving the world.' A guy like that has to have a Presence. His body language has to be confident. He has to smile, even when he doesn't feel like it. Sometimes acting is involved with that bit."

"You don't have to be that way around the watchtower."

"I guess. But it's hard, y'know? I get so used to masking when I'm wearing the suit, even if I'm doing stuff I believe in."

"Masking."

"It's- I'll just send you an article about it. It's about putting on reactions that aren't yours."

"I know that feeling."

Clark looks at him with *full* attention this time. Bruce resists the urge to melt into the shadows.

"You do? Go on" smiles Clark. And for all the warmth in the smile, there's something else too. That same hungry insistence birthed from the rush of press conferences and the push of red carpets. Bruce almost counters with his Bruce Wayne smile, on instinct alone.

"No." He says, a little too sharp.

And just like that, Kal is wearing a Superman smile again; "Okay, I won't push," he chirps, and turns back to the monitors.

A few minutes pass in silence, until the growing fidgeting in Bruce's peripherals is unbearable. He turns to face Kal. "What."

"Are you upset?"

"Why would I be upset."

"You managed to find out by accident. I must've done something pretty careless."

Bruce says, "no. I only noticed because you relaxed around me. That's not bad; We're a team."

And that's that.

Except it's not, because Clark Kent is, apparently, even more friendly than Superman.

When Bruce gets home, he finds a notification from Clark; a link to a (very well cited) article titled 'Masking (Personality).'

The accompanying message reads, *lucky for me I have my other mask to relax in ;p.* Attached is a picture of Clark's thick glasses.

It does something unfortunate to Bruce, who's still holding his cowl.

He gets another notification: *I'm glad you understood that Clark Kent isn't just a cover.*

This is starting to feel personal.

Chapter End Notes

Check me out on Tumblr if you want (my art hasn't been showing up in tags), I've been obsessing over the Gotham by Gaslight universe and all its potential. I might fuck around and draw some Victorian Superbat.

Hope everyone is staying safe over the holidays. I'll be updating every day until we're out of chapters.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Bruce is here to be seen by the press during a Batman sighting.

But Clark Kent is here.

Clark Kent is *here,* and Bruce is *in the Bruce Wayne suit* .

And now Bruce has to fucking *interact* with the man.

How?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hey Smallville! New meme format dropped on Saturday, featuring you!"

Clark peers over his desk at Lois's phone.

There's a picture on it of a familiar pair of tables. Clark is sitting at one, and the couple from the other night is making out at the other. Clark's face is a picture of discomfort.

Lois scrolls through several iterations of the meme, With text portraying Clark as an archetypical prude.

"Why did someone take a picture of me?" He asks weakly. Lois smirks.

"The guy at the table next to you, that's Bruce Wayne."

"He told me that last night too. The name seemed familiar. He's a celebrity?"

"He's a billionaire! A hot one, you should see some of the articles. He owns Wayne Enterprises?"

"Was he… was he the one who had the sex swing up in the background of the remote interview?"

"Yep! And the guy who threw up scampi all over Lex Luthor. Same guy."

"I didn't know that. Hm."

"Honestly half of the headlines coming out of rich people Gotham are just him. You should look it up. Wait, hold up, no, don't look it up now, Clark, we're at work and I'm not losing you to a rabbit hole this early in the day."

Lois sure knows how to keep him on track. She's probably the only one who knows just how much of a mess Clark Kent really is, so much that she had to back out when she realised he wasn't just Superman. Clark Kent is a good friend but the civilian identity was never really romantically appealing to her, was he. It still hurts.

***

When Clark gets home, he sits down in front of his laptop and pulls up Bruce Wayne's Wikipedia article. The 'personal life' section is four times longer than any content in the 'Wayne Enterprises' segment. It's impressive; WE is a big company. Clark doesn't think he could spark this much gossip if he tried. Most people couldn't spark that much gossip if they tried. One would almost think that Wayne is trying, but that's preposterous, right?

Two hours later, Clark is buried deep in the worst financial column he's ever read, trying desperately to find a coherent narrative to help him flesh out the 'philanthropy' segment of the article. There are gaps here surrounding how much Wayne participates in charitable programs. It's sparking Clark's reporter senses.

Maybe he can ask the man himself…

He shoots Perry an email.

***

Bruce is here to be seen by the press during a Batman sighting.

But Clark Kent is here.

Clark Kent is *here,* and Bruce is *in the Bruce Wayne suit* .

And now Bruce has to fucking *interact* with the man.

How?

Well, he could give him the whole 'drunk Bruce Wayne' act and make a fool of himself. He could drop the pretence, falling back into Batman's comfortable frown and exposing himself, potentially to everyone.

Or he could venture into unfamiliar territory for the sake of saving face, even if he's not *supposed* to save face in this suit...

"Hello." Bruce says, toning back the drunkenness and smiling a bit.

Clark Kent anxiously offers a hand to shake. His stiff jacket hikes up, vaguely reminiscent of a turtle shell. It looks stupid. Bruce is filled with a fierce affection.

"Clark Kent, daily planet. I had some questions for you about your charity work?"

Ah, that's harder. Clark must have done research. *Clark likes doing research.* This is a fact that Bruce knows. It's a comforting fact, because Bruce likes research too.

He's supposed to misdirect the press about charity, but. He also wants Clark to like him.

Strike a balance.

"I think the staff at the Wayne Foundation are doing an excellent job." He says.

Clark smiles and writes that down.

How the *fuck* do other people act when they care about looking likeable. People say Bruce is likeable sometimes, in both forms, but all of that is just *incidental* . He can't do it on command. Sure, he can smile and compliment, but it isn't *sincere* . He doesn't feel good about it afterwards. Bruce Wayne in public almost never says anything that wouldn't make Batman glare. Clark will probably never know that his friend was the one doing the stupid flattery, but *Bruce* will always know.

"Um… are you alright?" Clark asks, looking anxious. He always looks anxious in the pictures of him online. His eyes are tiny through those thick glasses. It's endearing.

Wait. Clark can hear heartbeats, right?

"I have social anxiety." Bruce says. It's not a lie. It would be a very good cover for elevated heartbeat, if he wasn't saying it out of character, in public, *to a reporter.*

Why is this so hard??

"Don't tell anyone," he adds.

Clark has a peculiar expression on his face. The man has done his research! He knows that Bruce Wayne isn't supposed to act like this!

"I have social anxiety too." Clark says softly.

Bruce fights to keep a smile on his face. It's a lying smile that he doesn't want to wear. Bruce is good at lying, but this is different. He doesn't *want* to lie right now.

"Well," continues Clark, with a reassuring smile *(softer than a Superman smile)*, "I've been prying around trying to figure out your role in the charity work that your business does. What

is your role?"

Dogged. Journalistic. Attentive. *How much of this is an act?* Bruce can't find any evidence that *any* of it is fake.

"No comment." Bruce responds. He's doing a terrible job being likeable, and he wants to know more about this reporter, but he can't just let loose to the press, so here he is in the worst of both worlds, making a fool of himself for someone who doesn’t even know him.

"Alright. Sorry for um, ambushing you." Clark fidgets with his tie and turns away.

Bruce can't think of anything else to say. He watches Clark go.

Clark lurks (hunched up and anxious) at the back of the venue for the rest of the evening, but Bruce can't find an excuse to approach.

***

The next day he gets a message asking if any portable computers exist that can keep up with superspeed (the answer is *I'll look into it*).

Then he gets a picture of metropolis at night, from the air. And a picture of a leaf with an interesting texture. He doesn't know how to respond. He never knows how to respond.

Luckily, that doesn't seem to make Clark stop.

***

"Hey Lois, what's triple texting?"

The bar is loud and crowded, but in a way that reminds him of taco Tuesday at the local bar back in Smallville. He used to run around the outside seating area with the other kids, or put his head on his mom's lap in the corner booth and fall asleep under the blanketing din. Now he and Lois make their own little cubby in this bar's loudness.

"It's a bullshit social construct, is what it is. If you're trying to get a date from someone who gets mad at you for triple texting? Run. They're probably too young for you anyways."

"I think he's at least thirty five? And it's not a dating thing."

"To all of our dismay, buddy. Please get back out there."

"I'm just worried because he's not responding to my messages."

"And what are your messages?"

Clark can feel himself blushing so he takes a deep swig of lemonade. "just some conversation openers, I thought. Some pictures I took."

An innocent grin splits her face. "Pictures, huh?"

"I take it all back. I hate you. Oh my god." His face just keeps getting warmer. "Just some. Some extracurricular stuff I can't share with anyone else."

Clark feels a wicked satisfaction at Lois's suddenly stalling brain. She stares at him for a full second before saying, "you finally came clean to Mr grumpy about your boring little day job?"

"Actually, he found out by accident. And I think that means he found out on purpose but feels bad about it."

"Wow" she croaks into her beer, "you make him sound so lovely."

"He's actually very calming to be around. It's like he enjoys taking care of all the complicated planning stuff, so I can just relax. It's nice."

"Hmm. What do you two even talk about?"

"Well. Mostly I talk about stuff I'm interested in, but if I can get him started on his interests, he just keeps going forever." He knows Lois isn't disregarding the affection in his tone.

Lois raises a lethal eyebrow. "Why don't you try to interact with him normally? Are you incapable of asking him to hang?"

"Lois, I think he would die. He doesn't do… friendship stuff. Or at least not *traditional* friendship stuff, but I don't even know if we're friends so it would be-"

"I think!" She speaks over him, "you should ask him to teach you something!"

Clark pauses. "...huh."

"IF I am correct, and you want to spend more time with your freaky little friend? That's what this is about, right? Your ass LOVES quality time and now you've got some other poor fool to unleash Clark Kent on."

"You like Clark Kent." He grins at her.

"Of course I do. I have toxoplasmosis." There's an affectionate edge in her voice as she sips her drink. "But you could do with more friends who know what a dweeb you are."

"Fine. I'll ask him to teach me how to assemble a bomb or something."

"It's honestly a miracle he hasn't blocked you."

***

Hey , goes the next message to Batman, *could you teach me how to defuse a bomb?*

The response is immediate. *If you have a bomb, call me asap*

No! I don't have a bomb. I just want to be more prepared.

A few seconds pass. Clark adds, *like you are* .

Batman sends him an address, with the directions, *Roof. 11pm tomorrow night. Stakeout. Civilian clothes.*

It's a date! :) Clark texts, and immediately regrets it because *wow* that sounds less weird when fictional people say it, but there's no going back now.

To break the tension (the tension that he probably made up just now in his brain), he sends a picture of his parents dog.

Her name is Claudia!

Batman doesn't respond. That's probably fine.

Chapter End Notes

I love people who text too much. I love people who never respond to texts.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

The team trudges back to the briefing room in low spirits.

Kal says, "Hear me out."

Bruce deadpans, "Oh no." They both know he doesn't really mean it, he's just angry. At least, he hopes they both know that.

"I met this guy." Kal continues brightly

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It's early spring. The cold still has a bite and the cherry trees in Metropolis are just launching into bloom. There are almost no trees in Gotham, but Clark can see from the upper troposphere that the city twinkles like a Christmas bauble. He snaps a picture and sends it ahead of his arrival. *Your city is beautiful.*

On the streets near the docks, there's almost nobody out. The occasional car passes, spouting clouds of vapour. Streetlights are few and far between. Clark lands in an alley, changes into civilian clothes, and then walks a block to the old cannery, before ducking into another alley and floating carefully up to the old metal roof. It doesn't look safe to stand on so he hovers just above.

There are two familiar figures sitting on the edge of the roof, staring down into the street. Batman mutters something to the other figure in a low voice and Robin whips around to stare at Clark.

"Hello." Clark whispers, unsure how loud he's allowed to be. A batarang hits him in the face and he catches it on the rebound, floating closer to the pair. "Sorry, I'm a bit early."

Batman still hasn't taken his eyes off the street. Robin stares harder at Clark. "He told me he was bringing a friend, not goddamn superman! I'm so sorry for hitting you in the face, I thought he was actually joking about the friend part–is that food?"

"...yes" Clark manages, glancing at the back of Batman's head. "I brought bao. I've never been on a stakeout with you before, but my parents always taught me to arrive early and bring food, so…"

"I KNEW he was stalking you! I also knew you were secretly a civilian."

Clark ‘sits’ down next to Robin (he’s technically still floating above the roof) and hands him the bag. "Stalking me, huh?"

"Just being a creep, same old same old." Mumbles Robin. He's a little bit shy, isn't he? He'd probably never admit it.

"Don't overeat" warns Batman, and that's basically a 'thank you for the food,' coming from him. He finally shifts from his position overlooking the street, turning to Clark. He seems… relaxed.

"So! What's the plan?" Asks Clark. They've prepped missions so many times that it runs deep grooves in their conversation habits.

"We’re having a lesson about bombs. You-" he points to Clark "-will keep an ear out if you hear anyone exiting that building. You will not otherwise use your powers while in Gotham."

Clark says, "Okie doke!" And stops trying to scope out the abandoned building below them.

He doesn't know why he didn't expect Batman to eat any of the bao; he's seen Batman eat before. Something about tonight is just more relaxed than he expected. In a matter of seconds, Batman has consumed one bun and produced two disarmed bombs. He takes off his gloves and uses a multitool to deftly disassemble both, explaining the workings as he goes.

Clark usually isn't good at this kind of thing, but Batman has that rapt tone again–he finds this interesting, and important, so Clark can't help but follow.

Robin obviously disagrees. When a big sack is dumped out to reveal four more common types of bombs, he lets out a loud groan and starts paying more attention to the food than the lesson (He’s obviously heard it all before). He keeps trying to ask Clark questions, but Clark can't break his focus away from Batman’s low voice, the competent movements, the scientific terms, the careful fingers. Batman’s hands have more body language than the rest of his whole body, except maybe when he’s fighting. He always has the same steady, unyielding intensity.

“Alright.” the man finally says, crouched over a heap of bomb parts, “Robin. You and our guest are going to reassemble these.”

“What?” Robin squawks, “You told me tonight was going to be chill!”

“The temperature is one degree celsius.” deadpans Batman. Something like a smile brackets the downturned corners of his mouth slightly. “I don’t know what you *thought* I meant. Teaching other people is the best means to encourage the retention of information.”

Robin makes an indignant noise, loudly whispering something about school nights, and Clark suddenly feels like he’s intruding in a private moment. He looks away. The street is still empty beneath them, so- wait a second.

“Hey, the rainwater drainage system around here is pretty big, right?”

They both snap their attention to him, so he quickly continues, “voices coming out of the storm drain. Getting louder. Can I use my x-ray?”

Batman just nods, silently sweeping all the bomb parts into a bag and pulling his thick gloves back on.

“The pipe between the catch basin and the storm drain tunnel itself is unusually large, I think because of 1800s sewer architecture?. It looks like the foundation drain of your building was built big enough for people too. They’re exiting the building that way now. Crawling.”

Robin scrunches his face at Clark. “I thought you were cool. Why do you know the scientific names of storm drain parts.”

Before Clark can respond, the two vigilantes have leapt down into the street below.

I like that kid.

***

Things are so simple around Kal (and he is Kal, not Clark, when they're on their missions. Bruce has to remember that). He always reports back exactly what Bruce needs to know. He fights like a machine, larger than life, and Bruce fights like a dancer down in the street, and they understand each other well enough that they don't even have to talk anymore.

Except when something goes wrong.

The team trudges back to the briefing room in low spirits.

Kal says, "Hear me out."

Bruce deadpans, "Oh no." They both know he doesn't really mean it, he’s just angry. At least, he hopes they both know that.

"I met this guy." Kal continues brightly, "he gave me some pointers on making sure buildings don't collapse."

Bruce grits his teeth. "Is rule number one 'prevent giant bugs from smashing a wall down?'"

"Well- no, but I think it would be good to optimise damage control."

Bruce stops in his tracks in front of the briefing room table, turning around to face Kal. "Damage control is for people who fail all preceding steps. Today, we got there *late,* " he

glares at Green lantern, "we *failed to identify the problem,* " he glares at Flash, "and we *acted before assessing the situation* ." The final sentence is directed towards Kal, who doesn't lean away when Bruce's finger prods him in the chest. His face is stern but there's something almost affectionate in his eyes. *He knows I don't mean it in a cruel way. He knows me.*

Bruce has to look away before he loses track of his frustration. "We don't need to get better at damage control. We need to get better at *everything else* ."

"Oh come on, Wonder Woman had to have done *something* wrong" mumbles Flash.

Diana has the gall to nod in agreement. "I could be better at the damage control. Everyone here has a point."

Bruce can only clench his jaw harder and hold still. Kal is saying something to Flash, his voice thrumming with concern. It's a good voice. A calming voice. Even when it was filled with anxiety or enthusiasm over the past few weeks, it always made him feel *safe* .

When Bruce finally moves, it's to sit down at the table and begin writing up a detailed list of points of failure. He grudgingly adds 'collateral damage' to the bottom, because Diana *did* punch an ant through a support beam on a 4 story building.

Kal is suddenly sitting next to him, voice lowered for conversation. "The guy I was talking about. He's an engineering professor at a community college. Cussed me out on local TV for picking up a bus wrong. We've been meeting up once a month as a sort of… debrief… but I think he would have some choice words for our teammates. You'd like him."

“Meeting as a civilian?”

“No! No, still with the cape and everything.”

Bruce glances over at the rest of the team. They’re on comm with Aquaman now and Diana is attempting to defuse a growing argument.

Kal beams over at them (*Is that a Superman smile? Not quite*). "Sometimes I think this team's love language is arguing."

"We can meet with your guy. Give me his info and I'll get back to you."

"Really?" Kal's smile blasts joy at the side of Bruce's face. It's sickening. It's cloying. It's his third favourite part of being Batman.

His fourth favourite part of being Batman is making plans, so he says, "only if you agree to memorise more of my contingency plans. We wouldn't be here if everyone had remembered the giant bug protocol."

"We have a giant bug protocol?"

"Do we have a deal."

Kal wilts in the corner of Bruce's eye. He has that kicked dog look again. Bruce can’t stand the kicked dog look. (NOT because it’s working! Because it's unbearable!)

“I’ll schedule my monitor duty with yours so I can walk you through it.” he says.

Kal immediately perks up. “Really? Only if it’s not too much trouble. I’m absolutely capable of doing it on my own, but I really enjoy learning things with people. And you make things so much more interesting!”

Unfiltered sentiments like that are just so. Typical. Ugh. Bruce is practically melting under the compliment.

“One of these days you’ll take a compliment without looking like you’re getting stabbed” laughs Kal, gesturing for the rest of the team to join them.

Bruce rearranges a few more schedules than necessary in order to match their shifts together.

Chapter End Notes

Clark's parents gave him bad advice. Don't arrive early to social events unless the host asks you to.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> Clark never found Bruce Wayne attractive from the pictures and the events, but right now the man is regal in the darkness. His face is mostly blank, his movements are fluid, he leads Clark down the hallway as quietly as any human Clark has ever met.
>
> Is this what it's like to watch Batman work without his trappings? It's so familiar, yet so jarring.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Luthor's party is in a ballroom at the top of a skyscraper. The Batman that lives in Clark's head grumbles about exits and escape routes, and Clark can't help but agree. Civilian socialisation makes him feel a lot like Batman, going unpowered into a battle with nothing but a mask and a plan.

Bruce Wayne is visiting Metropolis for this one, smooth as butter and surrounded by gossips. Clark still can't figure the man out. Last week, he was awkward and honest in a way that Clark hasn't seen in *any* of the interviews, but right now Wayne seems as lively and inebriated as ever.

Maybe that means tonight would be a better time to ask about the *extreme* and *enthusiastic* philanthropy of the Wayne Foundation. Clark has done a lot more digging, and it just gets more impressive; he can’t find any ulterior motives, there are just tens of millions of dollars pouring away into charity every year. The shareholders are pissed. The employees are unionised. Theoretically, airhead playboy Bruce Wayne is the only one who could be orchestrating it all, but even Occam’s Razor is struggling to reconcile the donations with the floppy little man across the room encouraging an older woman to feel his pec.

Clark, armed with a notepad and a prayer, approaches the group.

The second Wayne sees Clark, there’s a sort of stutter in his posture. His face gets very serious for a split second, then hikes back up into the easy grin, raising his oddly-pitched voice to call, “It’s you! The man from the- from the meme!”

And *now* there are at least seven pairs of eyes on Clark, with nowhere to run and no excuse to back down.

“I, um, was wondering, Mr. Wayne, if I could get a quote about the Wayne Foundation’s charitable work?”

“Oh *I remember* now, you were hoping to hear about all that stuff,” Wayne sways a bit, completely ignoring the elderly woman still groping his chest, “Sorry, babe, but I pay people to keep track of the specifics of all that. You know how it is with charity and taxes.” He winks at a waitress as he snags a champagne from her tray.

Clark tries very hard not to let the wincing distaste show on his face. Okay, they aren’t going to talk about the other night, when Wayne had social anxiety and declined to comment.

“I’ve heard,” Clark says carefully, trying not to feel like a sideshow display with all the people staring at him, “that your shareholders aren’t very happy with the amount of money going into charities.”

Wayne lifts an eyebrow, which seems *familiar* somehow, until he smiles and puts his arm around Clark conspiratorially; “there are *lots* of things my shareholders don’t like about the things I do, I think some charity is probably the least of their concerns.”

Wayne smells like alcohol and sweat and expensive cologne. Clark can’t help it if his shoulders hunch at the contact, or if people can see the uncomfortable grimace he’s trying so hard to suppress.

“Oh my,” Wayne giggles, leaning away in response to Clark’s flinch (the man seems to be strangely respectful of physical boundaries), “maybe you’re a little bit more shapely than I assumed under that jacket.”

Clark is the kind of guy to blush at something like that. The fact that he doesn’t is a testament to his distaste.

Someone is saying something unkind about his outfit, now, but he can’t see them because he’s staring too hard at his notebook. He just wanted a quote. This is why he can't do society events. *Stupid, stupid stupid stupid. You don't fit here.*

Wayne’s posture shifts slightly when the group laughs. He’s standing a little bit in front of Clark. Is it exclusionary? Or... defensive?

“Oh that is a *fascinating* remark, Marsha. See, when *I* made that remark, I was implying that I’d like him to undress, but when *you* made the remark, I’m sure you were hoping he would start dressing in *real furs,* like you, or with s*weatshop labour*, like your husband.”

That’s not what anyone expected him to say. There’s a silence, for a heavy moment, then Wayne laughs and chirps, “oh, I never know when you’ll take offence, Marsha, excuse me if that wasn’t as funny as I meant it. Now, was it Sebastian who was telling us about that french girl he met? I want to know *all* the details.”

And just like that, Clark is cut free to spend the rest of the evening in the corner, wondering what it all meant. He doodles on his notepad and waits for the speeches and feels... maybe a little less shitty.

He’s interrupted about an hour later.

"Superman" someone says, "Kal. Clark. Where are you."

It's Batman's voice, coming from a different part of the building. Clark tries to find it through the walls.

"Comms are down" it tells him, "there's kryptonite in the ceiling. This whole thing is a trap for Superman. I've already defused the bomb that was bait."

Clark sees him. He's in the back of the building, in front of a bank of monitors in a security room.

"Okay I can see you're looking at me now, yes, big surprise there" intones Bruce Wayne. His lips are pressed together in a familiar grimace. The rest of his face is blank.

"What the *heck*." Mutters Clark.

"Listen." Wa- Batman tells him, "Unless Superman shows up early, we have almost an hour before the bomb was supposed to go off. Get over here so we can make a game plan."

Clark gets over there.

***

Bruce shouldn't have tried flirting. Of course Clark isn't interested in Bruce Wayne, Clark is soft and intelligent and not at all confident enough to buy flattery. Even if the flattery has a hint of truth.

Bruce was not expecting to reveal himself this way. He was not expecting to reveal himself at all, actually. He just wanted to spend his time talking to Clark about science and maybe die one day, not-

Well, Bruce Wayne ruins relationships in one way or another. Every time he thinks he’s come to terms with his public image, something new comes up, someone else gets dragged in, and he’s back to wallowing in shame and wondering if it’s all worth it.

Clark is standing in the doorway, staring. Bruce would be surprised if Clark had *stopped* staring at him the entire way here.

"Oh my god."

"I understand if this changes how you see me."

"You have it so much worse than me!" Clark blurts, "I'm so sorry!"

"What."

Clark shuffles into the tiny room, closes the door, and walks *right up close to Bruce*, without any sort of mask or pretence to separate them. "I mean, Superman is a great guy! People like him! And you're out here, playing the idiot at the press for *charity*, and helping Wayne Enterprises make a bigger difference than goddamn *Batman*, and *I've* been complaining about having to smile all the time, Jesus *Christ*,"

This is not where Bruce expected the conversation to go. He expected Clark to ask questions, or to lose trust, or maybe to go starry eyed. He didn't expect *shame* or *pity*. It's uncomfortable.

But maybe it's also a relief. It took Clark, what, five minutes to correctly assess the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Batman? So few people *know* Bruce, but Clark fucking Kent walks and deduces away the facade, pushes through the armour, and instead of using that knowledge to his advantage (like Bruce would), Clark just... overflows with compassion.

"I'm just a guy who's an alien! You can hack a government agency AND tie a bow tie! And here I thought you were probably a shut-in in your spare time." His voice is all awe and admiration. "Do you EVER take a break?"

Bruce decides he likes the way Clark is looking at him right now. People don't usually look at Bruce Wayne OR Batman like that. And it's coming from someone who actually understands. Clark understands *exactly* what goes into the whole thing--the masking and the plotting and the greater good all coming together to squash the interesting things in life.

Clark's earnest face is cast into stark contrast by the light of the monitors. Still, he looks softer than Superman. His combed-back hair is wavy against his head, his jaw is rounder than it is square, and his smile is doing something to Bruce’s lungs. He's letting himself stand up straight, so he's taller than Bruce now, but he's still close, and his gaze is-

This is a can of worms that should not be opened.

"We need to get to the kryptonite in the crawlspace before they notice we're onto them, but I need your help to get there." He manages, turning away to wipe the security feed.

When he turns back, Clark is wearing the Superman suit.

***

It would probably be weird to hold Batman's arm, right? Clark always gets weird and initiates physical contact with people when he's anxious. It always felt like it would be an imposition just to *ask* to touch Batman. But back then, Batman had secrets that he didn't trust to anyone.

Clark is dizzy with the idea that Ba- that *Bruce* trusts him. Just *thinking* the name fills his head with exhilarated bubbles.

They make their way upstairs.

Clark never found Bruce Wayne attractive from the pictures and the events, but right now the man is regal in the darkness. His face is mostly blank, his movements are fluid, he leads Clark down the hallway as quietly as any human Clark has ever met (Clark has to float a bit to stay that quiet).

Is this what it's like to watch Batman work without his trappings? It's so familiar yet so jarring.

"Alright" whispers the *very* familiar husky voice. They've come to a small door with a big metal lock on it. The lock looks very complicated.

"I don't have enough time to unlock this without tripping it," Bat- *Bruce* continues (hehehe, Bruce), "could you do your thing?"

Clark enthusiastically does his thing. The door and the lock are perfectly intact when he's done, but a key part of the wall that was keeping the door closed is no longer attached to the other parts of said wall.

Bruce looks up at him with a funny expression- like they're sharing an inside joke or something. Clark is having a lot of Feelings about seeing the full expression across the full face.

In front of him is the most attractive man he's ever met, peering through the door and slipping into the hallway. The most attractive man he's ever met, silently taking out a pair of guards from behind. The most attractive man he's ever met, telling *Clark* of all people to stand guard while he collects the kryptonite from the crawlspace.

The roof is lead but not the ceiling under it, so they didn't expect Superman to be *in* the party.

They also didn't expect Batman to be so damn clever. Clark is practically glowing with pride in his friend.

Bruce hops back out of the crawlspace with a bunch of familiar crystals bundled into his dress jacket. Clark can feel the nausea rising at this proximity. His hands are weak.

"My gear is in my car, but the exits are guarded. If you can pop down and snag my suit, Alfred-"

There's a noise at the end of the hallway, shouting, further off.

Clark takes Bruce's hand and begins to pull. "Ba- Bruce." (the name feels light on his tongue!) "There's no time. Drop the kryptonite, I'm not leaving you here to expose your identity."

“We can’t just leave it behind for them to find. They could use it to hurt-”

“Drop it and run!” Clark gives Bruce’s hand a hard yank towards the boardroom across the hall. Bruce drops the kryptonite but they’re still close enough that everything is so *sluggish*. Clark can hear the people down the hall more clearly. He can hear safeties being taken off guns.

Not a good sign.

He turns, wraps Bruce in his arms, and jumps through the window.

His sapped ability to fly doesn’t return before they hit the ground, but he has enough strength to land them safely–-his feet crack the pavement and his knees bend to absorb the impact.

He opens his arms and pulls Bruce away from him *(wow, you absolutely shoved his face between your pecs there, what the hell were you thinking).* Bruce looks rumpled, slightly dazed.

“Are you okay? Do you have any injuries?”

Bruce focuses back up to the building behind him and opens his mouth (that familiar self-righteously cross expression, blossoming right there on that unfamiliar face),

A shot rings out from the top of the building.

Clark is fast enough now that he can cover Bruce with his body, but not fast enough to *catch* the bullet.

The green glowing bullet.

It hits him right in the lower back.

***

“Superman. Kent. Stay with me.”

Bruce’s hands are still shaking from the effort of hauling K- Clark here, and the sharp swerves of Alfred’s evasive driving aren’t helping with the precision required to extract the fragmented bullet.

"Y'know," slurs Clark, "I think I trust you a lot."

"Mm" Bruce picks another shard of kryptonite out of Clark's back. The back of a nice car is a bad place to do this. There’s blood everywhere.

"Like I don' drink alchohol cause I don' trust ME," Clark mumbles, staring blearily at the floor, "So I don ev'n know if I COULD getdrunk cuz I'm SCARED alla time. but youuu, you unnerstand, better'n anyone else. You geddit. Me. AN', yer the most competent guy in th' world. I don deserve you."

"You're selling yourself short." Bruce doesn't like the 'sad drunk' tone in Clark's voice, and he doesn't like the self-effacement.

"Nah. Superman messes ever'th'n up constn- constenant,"

"Constantly." Offers Bruce, dropping another shard into his pouch.

"Exactly! I'm too slow, or, or too careless, or…" Clark slumps listlessly at nothing.

Bruce has a small involuntary thought about having a shirtless man sprawled on his stomach across the back seat. The idea is firmly shoved into Bruce's little box of repressed thoughts.

"I think-"

"And THEN there's CLARK!" The man exclaims, waving an arm and then wincing at the wound in his back. "LOIS thought I was *acting* when she first found out. I WISH I was acting. I'm really just this muchova fuckup."

Bruce is extremely uncomfortable. He wasn't expecting the evening to end with a heart to heart. If he was, he would have finally written that protocol for heartfelt reassurance. It's the only protocol he procrastinates. And now Clark is swearing, which he NEVER does usually. Or Superman doesn't. Hm. At least he seems to be increasingly coherent with each removed piece of bullet.

Bruce quietly says, "don't talk about my friend that way."

And- oh no, no no no, Bruce isn't the guy who should be having this conversation, because those are *tears* staining the seat under Clark's head, and Clark carefully grasps Bruce's free hand with a wince. "I love you, man."

And what do you say to that? Is this a bro moment? Bruce has been in bro moments before, but Bruce Wayne doesn't care about hurting other people's feelings, and Batman is never expected to give truly meaningful input. *Note to self: research signs of platonic affection between men.*

Luckily it seems like Clark doesn't expect him to reply; he's staring listlessly at the upholstery again, mumbling something about cardboard.

It takes about fifteen more minutes of medical care before Bruce can construct a complement that feels right.

"You're good with people." he says, removing the last shard. "You care about people more than anyone else I've met."

It doesn’t feel like enough. Clark sits up as the wound begins to fade, watching Bruce with a peculiar expression.

“Sometimes,” Bruce begins hesitantly, and stops. Clark sits and waits for the end of the sentence. “Sometimes I get too focused on justice, or the execution of plans. You help me remember what’s important. Why we’re here.”

“Can I hug you?” Clark asks.

“No.” says Bruce, automatically. He doesn’t want to start procrastinating new protocols like *how to hug friends*. He’s put in enough emotional labour today.

“Okay.” Clark smiles. This one is a sad smile *(Superman doesn't do sad smiles, but Clark does)*. He’s probably not sad about the hug, it’s probably something else, but it’s so hard to tell. *Why are adults so complicated?*

But maybe, just this once, ‘complicated’ might be worth it.

Chapter End Notes

That was very nearly an action scene. Writing it destroyed me.

Also, this is my last time posting at inconvenient hours. If someone sees me do it again, you have full permission to point at me and shout, "SHAME!"

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Clark puts his chin on folded hands and looks across the batmobile at Bruce. He looks sad, almost wistful.

"I want to be like them when I get old," he says.

"The part where they've formed a rivalry between departments or the part where they have a nice little gay marriage in the suburbs."

Chapter Notes

We've crossed the halfway mark and they're still just close pals because their friendship is Extremely Interesting

(it's just the chapter halfway mark. We still have 20k words to go)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are two hours left before the team meets the engineering professor. Bruce is analysing samples with Alfred in the cave when Clark calls.

"I need a favour."

"Anything." Bruce responds immediately. Clark sounds uncharacteristically worried. He almost never asks for help. Is he in trouble? Hurt?

"My oven just gave out."

...

Bruce lets the silence hang like a noose. He glances at Alfred as if to say *look what I have to deal with*.

Alfred looks... Smug.

"I mean," Clark continues on the other end of the line, "Professor Pollock asked me to bring pie again. And everyone is coming, so I was going to make two. Maybe three. But my oven is

dead, and Lois is out of town, and Jimmy's apartment doesn't even have an oven, and a fresh pie can't survive the speeds I'd have to fly to bake it in time at my parents. I don't have very many friends. So I figured, you probably have an oven, right?"

"This is a secure channel. For emergencies." Bruce grates out.

"I *just* got Professor Pollock to respect me, he'll lose *all respect* if I flake out on him again! Please?"

Bruce hesitates. Alfred is giving him a Look. It's the same Look Alfred would give him when Bruce made a friend in grade school. He wants to meet Clark.

Ugh.

Bruce should just start wearing pastel colours for how soft he's gotten; "alright. Let me give you the address."

Clark actually gasps. "Really? Thank you so much! Are you at your manor?"

"Yes, the-" begins Bruce, but Clark has already hung up.

He stares reproachfully at Alfred's smug little smile.

"Wait. We need to warn Jason."

There's a mad scramble to get his hair back in reasonable shape and help Jason pick up clothes around the room Clark will probably never get close to. ("He has x-ray vision! He can see my room from anywhere!")

It's stupid to make a big deal out of it. Bruce *specifically* didn't want to make a big deal out of it. And yet, Alfred and Jason are making a big deal out of it. If he had known this was going to happen, he wouldn't have accepted such a last minute petition (formal introductions require at least 3400 words of planning that Bruce hasn't had time to write up).

It's almost a relief when Clark knocks on the door with windswept hair and a crooked cape, carrying a large container of *four* uncooked pies. He looks like a disaster. As usual.

"Oh my gosh what a beautiful house!" Clark exclaims, then exuberantly begins introducing himself to Alfred. Alfred has an excellent poker face but Bruce knows the man is experiencing more enthusiasm aimed at him in this moment than he has experienced in the past year of his life, and that year included visits from Dick. Clark is A Lot, isn't he. He goes in to hug Bruce before seeing Bruce's expression and transferring the movement into an awkward pat on the cheek. It's terrible. It's awful. This is probably his closest friend.

Jason finally thunders down the stairs, pausing and nonchalantly waving at the bottom before strolling away like he didn't know Clark was coming, and just happened to pass by.

"We have ninety minutes remaining until we are expected." Says Clark, defaulting to his serious mission face, "how big is your oven."

"Our oven can bake *six* pies at once" Alfred tells him (with a hint of pride), "it's preheated to three fifty fahrenheit for you, sir."

When the pies are in the oven, Clark and Alfred start discussing baking tips, which somehow leads to a very heated discussion about the use of vegetables in meat pies. Bruce is distracted by a head peeking past the edge of the kitchen door.

"You can just come in and talk to him." He tells Jason quietly from the doorway.

"I don't really care either way. I'm just curious what he's saying."

"You've always thought he was cool. You don't have to pretend you don't. That doesn't make you cooler."

"I think *Superman* is cool, and even then he's no Wonder Woman. This guy is really weird."

"Everyone cool has a 'weird' alter ego. Look at me."

Jason gives him a grim look. "You aren't cool at all."

That's fatherhood for you.

"Hey." Clark pokes his head around the doorway. "Were you going to come in? It's Jason, right? I heard you were pretty handy with a wrench! You should teach me sometime!"

And there goes Clark with his one trick pony, single-handedly winning over the entire Wayne household by asking them about their skillsets. Bruce is only glad Dick isn't here or there would be some extreme aerial acrobatics going on right now.

Jason is talking, just like Alfred was talking, and just like Bruce always talks, to a smiling face with an extremely variable amount of eye contact and a pair of hands anxiously running their fingers over-

He plucks the batarang out of Clark's hands. Its edges are dulled, presumably from Clark tracing them with his hands many times since the stakeout on the roof. Clark quietly shoots him a smile and continues listening to Jason describe exactly how to dislocate an arm.

The batarang is… there's something important about it, but Bruce has too many things going on in his brain to parse what it might be. He leaves Clark in the kitchen with the others and heads down to the cave to suit up.

***

Clark is eyeing the batmobile warily.

"You don't have to ride with me." Bruce tells him.

"No, I can, uh, I can do cars like a normal guy." Says Clark, "just so long as I don't have to drive. I don't want to be responsible for that."

"I don't trust anyone but Alfred to drive me." Says Bruce, "I wouldn't let you drive if you begged."

Clark gives him a pleased smile. "Well look at us. All evened out."

***

The professor had resolutely refused to meet anywhere except his own house. That being said, his background check was clean and Clark trusted him, so if anyone saw Batman carrying a pair of pies into a little house in suburban Metropolis, it wasn't HIS fault, was it.

J'onn opens the door. "Thank goodness you are here. Flash has decided to demonstrate his abilities by phasing through ice cubes."

"Has he gotten better at that trick?"

There's a small BANG from somewhere in the house. J'onn moves aside.

There are pieces of ice cube embedded in the ceiling of the kitchen. Aquaman, Flash, Hawk Girl and an unfamiliar older man are hiding behind an upturned table (also with ice embedded in it).

“Fascinating! The molecular structure obviously can’t hold up, but- Oh, Superman!” The man (presumably Pollock–he looks about 60 with white hair and a pale beard still tinged redhead orange) gets to his feet carefully and takes one of the pies from Clark. “Oh my, you made two?” -he catches a glimpse of Bruce- “Four pies? You know you didn’t have to make any, your friends brought food as well. I’m just glad I can be of service to heroes like you.”

Bruce makes sure Clark sees his glare. Clark doesn't even look apologetic.

Once they set the table upright and pull the ice out of the ceiling, it seems so… domestic. A large portion of the league is just sitting around in a kitchen full of potluck food (and whatever unholy condiment pile Flash brought). Clark is happily puttering around with plates and forks, chatting to this (extremely unintimidating) professor. There's something about how Clark acts in a kitchen that keeps nagging at Bruce. It's similar to how Bruce acts in the cave. He looks... at home.

Soon they’re all squished up on the couch, with Wonder Woman and Green Lantern added to their party. Half of them are sitting on the floor, and professor Pollock insists on bringing them all tea and slices of pie before he begins his presentation. He’s an odd man, definitely

not the most socially competent, and he keeps staring at Batman like he’s not quite sure he’s dreaming. *Good. Keep guessing.*

When Pollock *does* present, he’s a good professor. He understands how to respond to even the most manic and bizarre questions posed to him, and apparently he asked one of his colleagues for some tips about water and flood dynamics, because even Aquaman has some very specific notes to take. Unfortunately, the old man seems to have focused on Superman for so long that his examples are just one big list of Superman’s old mistakes. Clark’s face grows more and more pinched through the evening until he excuses himself quietly from the room.

Bruce makes eye contact with Diana and waits a few minutes before following.

He finds Clark in the cold backyard, looking up at the night sky. What must the night sky look like with such enhanced vision?

"Sorry." Says Clark. His voice breaks. He's been crying.

Bruce just moves closer. Light pollution is low here. There are many stars.

"How do you do it?" Asks Clark, "it's so much pressure and you hardly ever crack."

Somewhere, a dog barks.

"I don't have to be public," Bruce tells him. "I don't have to be liked."

Clark nods. He hasn't taken his eyes off the sky. He takes Bruce's hand and squeezes it very faintly.

"We both care," Bruce tells him. It's important Clark knows that. "But you have always been set on bringing people hope."

"You're good with kids." Clark whispers. "I've seen you bring hope to people."

Frost is forming on the roof of the house next door.

"I get it though, it's just something you bring out sometimes. Hope is one of your tools, not your whole persona. One of your skills."

He sandwiches Bruce's hand between his own in a preoccupied attempt to warm it up. His thumb traces Bruce's gauntleted fingertips. It's warm. It's familiar.

"It hurts." Clark says, "to be vulnerable all the time."

Bruce rolls up his sleeve to show a set of deep purple bruises on his arm. "It does."

Clark looks down, finally, and he looks like he's about to apologise, so Bruce adds, "it's the same. Just in different ways."

Clark nods. "I guess this is just another mission where you've saved me, then. Thank you for following me out here."

The moon is rising.

"I'm not good at feelings." Says Bruce, "But I have your back." The night wicks the words out of him before he can kill them. It's hard not to be vulnerable right now. Not here.

"Let's go back inside."

The presentation is over. Everyone but Diana has gone home, and she looks up at them with delight from her spot on the couch. She must be on her fourth slice of pie. Sitting with her is professor Pollock and another man who wasn't here earlier; He's probably about sixty as well, though he's much skinnier and he wears round glasses. He looks more competent and less vague than professor Pollock.

"There you two are!" Diana is delighted to see them. "Come! Sit! The professors were speaking to me of their long and illustrious marriage, and I simply had to stay and listen! Did you know that professor Bui is an expert in organic chemistry?"

"I did." Clark says, waving shyly at the new man. "It's good to see you again. Thank you for letting our team invade your house, I think your husband helped us a lot tonight."

Professor Bui casts a curious (but polite) glance at Batman. "Of course! Ned doesn't often get the chance to run dangerous experiments in the most boring scientific field there is." He lets loose a small smirk, "I'm glad he could have a taste of what the *fun* sciences are like."

Diana smiles into her tea. Clark lightly coughs with amusement.

"Ignore him." Pollock leans in conspiratorially, "his idea of fun is dripping polymerase into a petri dish. I'm having the justice league over for dinner. We know whose field is more interesting."

"Tell that to Gotham scientists," Bruce mutters to Clark, who huffs a laugh (*not a Superman laugh*). They're both still standing behind the couch awkwardly.

But of course, the whole room hears it, and Diana sweetly asks, "What was that, Batman? Gotham scientists?"

"I meant," Bruce begins slowly, because he was not expecting to explain himself to outsiders, "I know multiple doctors of biological chemistry who have weaponised their knowledge for abomination and evil. They outnumber structural engineers by a great deal."

Clark gasps, "Batman, you can't just call someone's profession evil!"

“I’m not saying it’s evil, I’m saying it’s more interesting.”

“And you think structural engineers are all good guys.”

“We both know they aren't. I know for a fact that you are intimately familiar with the concept of hostile architecture.”

Clark blushes. “That’s civil engineering and design, not structural engineering! You of all people should know a thing or two about engineering, right?”

“I know a thing or two about *materials science*, or *mechanical* engineering, but I’m far more familiar with biochemistry than other fields of engineering.”

Bruce is suddenly painfully aware of the attention of the rest of the room. This is too much information to share with civilians. He goes quiet.

Clark is a goddamn hero, because his next words are, "we should probably get going. Diana, are you staying?" Bruce lets him navigate the goodbyes and thank-yous and leftover pies, very aware of the way Clark hangs on his arm on the way out the door.

"Oh my gosh, sorry for excusing us early, that was just a lot and you seemed to be ready to leave too." Clark leans on the hood of the batmobile, placing the leftover pie in the passenger seats.

"Yes." Says Bruce. This scene is just like a thousand other mundane scenes, with a woman and a car and an invitation back to a secluded place. The similarities are distracting him.

Clark puts his chin on folded hands and looks across the batmobile at Bruce. He looks sad, almost wistful.

"I want to be like them when I get old," he says.

"The part where they've formed a rivalry between departments or the part where they have a nice little gay marriage in the suburbs."

Clark's face shifts in thought. "Honestly, either? Both? They're just so- so peaceful and in love, they don't have to worry about saving the world."

Bruce knows that feeling. He makes note of Clark’s wistfulness; despite his amiability, Clark is a profoundly lonely man. It really doesn’t make sense. He has a heart of gold and a keen interest in just about anything he learns about. *Everyone* should be tripping over themselves to be his friend.

"Though, I wouldn’t want to do it in the suburbs.” Clark muses, “say what you want about small towns and I’ll say what I want about the big city, but both at least have *soul* to them.”

That earns a smile from Bruce. He pauses awkwardly by the driver’s door–-he doesn’t want the conversation to end, but he doesn’t have an excuse to stay or anything to say.

“Do you think you’ll retire one day?” Clark asks.

Bruce doesn’t. He fully expects to be killed in a fight. He’s come so close so many times, it’s only a matter of time before someone snuffs him out.

Clark notices the silence and offers up a sad smile (*not a Superman smile*). “Well. We can dream, can’t we.”

And even if Clark has the strength of a god, it is a *we*, isn’t it. Clark is in danger too, not as often as Bruce but often enough that retirement doesn’t seem statistically likely.

“I think,” says Bruce, “that retirement for me would mean… I would become a lot like Alfred, helping someone else organise their batcave.”

This time the smile is sweet as honey, affectionate, soft. “That’s a good dream. I hope you get to live it one day.”

When Bruce gets home, he thinks about sitting next to someone on a couch instead of claiming an armchair. He always gets the armchair, Dick and Jason take the couch…

But he can't just keep adopting children forever, can he.

Chapter End Notes

(he can and will keep adopting children forever)
I never have any clue how to reconcile Alfred being British and Alfred apparently knowing how to cook. I based him off my British aunt who usually knows how to cook but also has several Bad Food Opinions.
Also, Jason is at Literally the worst part of puberty in this fic, because stupid stubborn teenagers are sometimes very sweet actually. It's my favourite age group to teach.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

For once, restraint isn't everything.

Chapter Notes

here I am uploading at a bad time again ;-; I am going on a trip and cell reception may be patchy so! be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s 3pm on Tuesday when someone knocks on the entrance to the Batcave.

Bruce pauses his typing and stares. He knows immediately who it is, of course, because there's only one idiot who would knock politely on a hidden door to a secret lair. He still checks his cameras to see the familiar, honest slouch of Clark Kent. The other monitors confirm that Alfred let him in. He looks like he just got here from work, with a horrible tie and a computer bag over his shoulder. Bruce remotely grants him access.

Clark floats down the steps, folding up his glasses and peering around the dimly lit cave. Bruce can see, in the reflection of the monitor, that Clark is smiling faintly up at an especially restless group of bats (*this smile is fascinated, not a superman smile*).

The silence is comfortable. At least Bruce hopes it's comfortable. Clark will fix it if it isn't comfortable.

After a few minutes, Bruce sets his code to run a test and swivels in his chair to look up at Clark, who seems to be up by the ceiling quietly exploring the bat colonies.

"Don't touch them, they carry rabies" Bruce warns.

Clark carefully floats back to the floor. His face looks odd, somehow. "It's good to see your setup, It's cozy down here. Have you had any outbreaks of white nose syndrome?"

"Not yet. I'm donating to research on prevention and isolating this colony. The urban setting is- well, it's an isolated population."

Clark floats over to the desk. His hands are whimsically holding his computer bag behind his back, but his face is almost sad now.

"What are you here for?" Bruce asks, editing a line of code to avoid the attention.

"I got tired," Clark says quietly, "some days it's just hard being Clark Kent. It's harder being Superman. Both come with… expectations. It's hard being human."

Bruce looks up at a bittersweet smile (*Superman would never smile like that, Superman isn't nearly as complicated and fascinating as Clark Kent*).

Clark pauses. "It's like no matter how hard I try, I'm too… much. Too strong, too unyielding, too loud… And then that whole- that whole mess, of the things that I'm too much of, I'm expected to use all that to save people's lives. Like I can funnel it all down into a tool and never let it come through accidentally."

"Mh" Bruce responds (eloquent!). He edits another line of code and sets the program for another test. Then he turns back to Clark. Sometimes making eye contact is easy with Clark; there's always such deep trust in that gaze that Bruce finds himself relaxing his defences. Just a brief reprieve. The other man can always notice and deter any physical threats.

Clark sits on the edge of Bruce's desk. He plucks a batarang off of it- the same blunted one Bruce had pulled from him on Sunday. His gaze rests on the weapon, almost confused.

"I had an interview. For a raise."

"Did it go well?"

Clark keeps his eyes on the batarang. "A plane malfunctioned and I had to stop it from crashing into any skyscrapers. I missed the interview completely."

"Oh." says Bruce.

Clark looks like he's been crying, that's what it is. His face doesn't get puffy like a human's might, but his eyelids droop just a bit more, his eyebrows are just a bit too sad. Bruce is suddenly angry on behalf of his friend, at the injustice of it all. He *knows* that injustice.

"If money is a problem-" Bruce manages, but Clark shakes his head.

"It's not that. It's just, having a life, y'know? I want to have a life that isn't messed up all the time. I'm glad I can help people, but sometimes I wish I could just. Not. Sometimes I wish I could be human."

Bruce nods. He absolutely does not know what that's like. Having a human life is extremely tedious.

Then again, he doesn't have a very good grasp on what the average human life is like.

"Do you mind if I, um-" Clark gestures to his computer bag, "get some work done? I'll be quiet. I just didn't want to be alone again."

That stirs something in Bruce. Usually when someone asks him for something, he understands their logic because of his many expertise, but Batman isn't exactly known for providing good company.

Apparently Clark thinks he is.

***

The rattle of keys fills the room from two sets of keyboards. Bruce is sitting in his chair at his desk and Clark is lying on the floor nearby, propped up on his elbows like a schoolgirl at a slumber party. He's supposed to be doing some digging into a line of recalled beauty products, but instead he's on Batman's Wikipedia page. Again. A guy with exactly the same kind of glitched out username as before is trying to *add typos* into the "public opinion" segment of the article. They're exactly the sort of edits that often go unnoticed because of how easy to miss they are, but Clark gets a notification when someone edits this specific article, so here he is, sitting around reverting the article and waiting for the guy to get locked out. It's extremely frustrating.

He pauses when he notices the pause in typing on Bruce's computer.

"Do you even own a proper suit?" Bruce asks, seemingly out of the blue.

"I wear it to all the Justice League meetings," jokes Clark.

"You know what I mean."

Clark does know what he means. "How do you define 'proper?'"

"Something that fits you."

"Something that *fits me*, or something that I can wear in *public* or something that fits *Superman*?"

"They're the same thing."

"Well, Clark is a little bit shorter and he shouldn't draw attention to- to his body. Superman always keeps his shoulders back and stands up very straight, and requires uncomfortably form fitting clothes."

"And you. When you aren't trying to hide or be a symbol. What kind of suit would you wear."

Clark looks up at the man. He's still staring at his computer with a blank face. The lack of expressed emotion is a sign of trust; he doesn't usually emote without effort and he knows

Clark won't misunderstand that. At least, Clark hopes that's what it is. It sure would be horrible if Bruce thought of this whole thing as an imposition.

"I don't know. All my time is either spent in the public eye or trying to avoid it. What kind of suit would you wear?"

"I have over a hundred suits."

"First, gross, that's a lot of money to spend on suits. Second, those are Bruce Wayne's suits. What would YOU wear?"

He notices when Bruce covertly glances at the cape hung up in the corner, and he can't help but laugh. It bursts out of him and only doubles down when Bruce shoots him a patented bat-glare. He wheezes on the floor under his favourite judgemental gaze.

He loves moments like these, when human contact moves in routine patterns. The repetition of the laughter and the glares has worn a comforting groove into his life, familiar as the grooves on the palm of his hand. It's so hard to find grooves like this in the fragile, intimate parts of humanity that perpetually exclude him.

When his laughter subsides a bit, he realises he accidentally smacked his hand on the floor hard enough to crack it, and looks up at Bruce, frozen. But Bruce's mouth is turned into that thoughtful little smile, like the cracks in the floor aren't as important as the laughter. Clark knows, on some level, that the cracks in the floor *aren't* as important as the laughter. But cracks are always so important, and restraint is always so important, and today has been so long and so hard, so the lingering chuckles morph into hiccuping sobs.

For once, restraint isn't everything.

Bruce looks deeply uncomfortable. Clark doesn't want to impose but he also knows that Bruce would probably tell him if he was imposing. So he cries on the floor of the Batcave, in the quiet, friendly dark.

At some point, Bruce sits down on the floor too and allows Clark to lean into him. The man is still coiled up like a spring but something about him right now is different. Less guarded. He hands the blunted batarang back to Clark from the floor.

Clark basks in the understanding silence, running his fingers over the weapon's edge. Bruce pulls out a mobile device and continues working on it as well as he can with Clark propped up against him.

They stay like that for a long time.

Eventually, Bruce gets up and moves over to his desk again, just a few seconds before the door to the cave opens and Jason comes springing down the steps.

"I heard we had company!" He chirps. He's carrying a backpack, he must have just gotten back from school.

"We are being independently productive in the same space." Bruce tells him. Clark can see the affection in Bruce's eyes. "Do you want to join us? You have an essay due on Monday."

"That's like three days away." Jason scoffs. "I'll be fine."

Bruce narrows his eyes, but apparently the glare doesn't work on Jason, because he throws down his backpack and starts doing warmup stretches.

"How was school?" Asks Clark, wincing at the thickness in his voice.

Jason looks at him sidelong. It's very very obvious Clark has been crying, isn't it. "It was good."

It's not that easy to get rid of Clark, though; He's nothing if not tenacious. "What classes do you have?"

"English, Math, Biology, Ceramics." Jason lists, twisting against the wall.

"What's your favourite?"

"The part where I go home at the end of the day."

Clark lets himself give it up; this isn't a household where smalltalk is important, and Jason is at That Age in his early teens. It really is the worst time, poor kid.

Jason eventually moves off to use the exercise equipment. Clark starts typing up his article. Bruce adds code and keeps running his program.

It's comfortable. It's safe. Something about this dark cave reminds Clark of the farmhouse all the way back in Kansas. The feeling of landing on the porch while the lights are on, the smell of caramelising onions in the kitchen.

Maybe, he thinks in the easy silence, *it feels a bit like home.*

***

When Clark gets home from work on Thursday, Bruce Wayne is asleep on his couch. Two months ago, this would have been strange and unthinkable, especially since he left the door locked when he went to work. Today it just makes him smile. Bruce needs more sleep, and he feels safe enough to do so in Clark’s apartment, even if he’s never been here before in his life.

Hopefully he didn’t come here on urgent business.

Clark is very careful to stay quiet, locking the door and floating lightly above the floor to put away his work things and *oh no, this place is not fit for company, this is such a mess. How quietly can I clean up?*

The thing that eventually wakes Bruce up is the sink running.

Clark focuses on washing the dishes, not turning around for whatever rumpled embarrassment Bruce might be feeling, even if his hair might be sticking up and he might be blinking in the light and it might make Clark's heart leap into his throat. It's not the type of situation that he usually allows himself to be caught in, so Clark won't intrude.

"You can stay for dinner if you want," he offers, because his parents raised him right.

Bruce makes an incoherent noise, presumably because his parents didn't finish raising him right.

Clark finishes the dishes at a normal speed. He dries his hands. He putters around to brew some coffee. Finally, when he's absolutely sure that Bruce *has* to have regained *all* his composure, he leans his back against the counter to face Bruce on the couch.

Bruce is nervous. It's always hard to tell with him, but a muscle in his jaw keeps clenching and unclenching. He looks especially worse for wear today, he probably hasn't slept in a long time.

At least I could help him out with that.

"I came by to bring you something."

Bruce hands him a box that he must have been sleeping on or something, Clark swears it wasn't there a second ago.

It won't do to just stare, he has to actually take it out, but he knows what's inside before he opens the lid.

It's a suit. A nice one.

"I can never wear this in public." Clark says, quietly.

"I know." Bruce tells him from the couch, "but you deserve nice things."

The suit is a very dark maroon. From afar it might look black or brown, but up close there are variations in the colours of the wool that makes it up, mixing strong red fibres with the darker colours. Bruce probably had to talk himself into buying something so colourful. He even included a light blue dress shirt and a tie. He must have put a great deal of thought into this.

Bruce is staring at Clark, searching for a reaction.

"Thank you." Clark means it. He's using all his self control not to tear up over this.

"Well? Are you going to try it on?" Asks Bruce, "if it doesn't fit you I'll have to take it back to be altered."

"Ah. Right. I'll, um, go get changed." Clark clings to the box and walks into his bedroom, where he very pointedly does not burst into tears.

The shirt is silky against his skin. The jacket is luxurious- it fits him just right, hugging him but not too closely. He can actually move in it, freely, without straining the seams, and most importantly of all, *it fits his shoulders.* He doesn't bother wondering how Bruce has his measurements, that sort of privacy isn't important to him and Bruce knows it.

Clark doesn't have a full length mirror so he's not sure how he looks, but he feels *good.* The suit makes him feel *attractive.* He's not masking for the news or hiding from uncomfortable eyes, he's just. Being a guy. He's a normal human guy who gets to own a suit and look handsome in it.

He walks into the living room and leans on the doorframe by the couch, beaming down at Bruce, his teammate. Bruce, who does selfless things. Bruce, who always has his back. Bruce, who… looks surprised. He usually doesn't get surprised enough to emote it. His heart rate instantly goes up when he sees Clark, then Clark realises he's been listening to his friend's heartbeat, which is invasive and intrusive and a breach of trust, probably. He blocks it out.

"Thank you," he says. Then, "oh, I also don't have a big mirror, could you take a picture of me? That way I can send it to Lois too."

"Lois." Repeats Bruce slowly, like he's still coming up to speed with the conversation.

"Yep! She's the only person who knows both sides of me? Other'n my parents and you, of course. She's always buggin' me about leaving my comfort zone, ya know?"

Bruce quietly lifts his phone and takes some pictures.

“Thank you!” Clark shakes out his sleeves and does a little spin. “Man, I could go dancing in this! I’ve always wanted to learn how to dance!”

“So you *are* going to wear it in public?”

“No. That probably means you have to be the one to teach me.”

“Or Lois.” says Bruce quietly. Something about the way he says it is off.

Clark frowns. “I guess, but you’re probably a better dancer than her, and you’re *definitely* a better teacher!”

Bruce sits up fully on the couch, shaking off his smug little lounge. “I should probably be back to Gotham before it gets dark.”

“Ope! Right, sorry! I mean, thank you!”

Bruce stops in the doorway and looks back at Clark. He’s still… off. A little bit quieter than usual.

“You look good in that suit.”

“Thank you! It makes me really happy! You’re a good friend, Bruce.”

Bruce pauses like he has something to say. He finally manages, “Rain check on the dancing.”

Clark can only smile. He spends the evening cooking himself dinner and dancing to his favourite songs.

Chapter End Notes

Jealous little man.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

"Bruce, either tell her or don't. Stop incriminating me in your weird sex persona."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clark Kent is at the next benefit ball. Bruce has to stamp down feelings of relief upon noticing the hunched frame across the room, because Clark almost definitely does *not* want to be around the most embarrassing man here. At least this time he doesn't hold it against Bruce for being like this. Hopefully.

So Bruce keeps his distance and flirts with everyone else, and spills champagne on himself, and spills red wine on the drapes (because he's in a bad mood), and as he's helping himself to another glass (because his bad mood might be worse than he thought), he notices someone hovering by his shoulder.

It's Clark.

He's facing the same way as Bruce, keeping his eyes on something across the room, but he's standing just a little bit too close for coincidence. His hand is fidgeting in his pocket and Bruce would bet his bottom dollar that it's wrapped around a familiar batarang.

His suit is the old one. It's a shame. Bruce knows, logically, that the other one was never going to be worn in public, but still. He hasn't been able to get Confident Clark off his mind.

He lets himself move a little bit further towards Clark, until their shoulders almost bump. Neither of them looks at the other. The party suddenly feels a million times more comfortable.

Then Clark murmurs, "oh! Lois *did* make it!" And Bruce turns to see Lois Lane striding towards them from across the room. Something goes sour about the evening.

"Have you told her about my…" he trails off.

"That's up to you. Do I know you tonight, Mr. Wayne?"

Bruce is always uptight about secrecy, but he also doesn't want the new comfort of 'being around Clark in public' to dry up. Lois is already keeping one superhero secret. On the other

hand, the woman is a reporter. There are too many variables to analyse in the moment, and Clark's presence makes Bruce irrational, so

"You trust her?" He asks. And huh, there's the other thing that he can't quite put his finger on which is souring potential trust for Lane. He just feels unpleasant when he looks at her. *Why do human interactions require so much self-analysis.*

"I'd trust her with my life." Somehow that makes Bruce feel worse. Then Clark looks at him earnestly. "The only other person I trust as much is you."

Oh.

That makes him feel better.

Which implies the feeling is in fact *jealousy* .

And jealousy, by definition, is illogical. And petty.

This realisation *should* make the feeling go away, but instead Bruce is just painfully aware of his own irrational impulses.

Lois has arrived. She's beautiful, and sharp, and she's looking at Clark like he's a puzzle she wants to solve. Bruce's stomach feels cold.

"Hello Clark." She says, "Hello? Bruce Wayne??"

Clark smiles at her awkwardly. "You know how I get at parties without company."

"Oh no." She says, turning to Bruce, "did he eat a toothpick again?"

"What." Bruce says, glancing at Clark (who is looking increasingly pink).

"Lois!"

"I just like winding him up" Lois stage whispers, sensing a willing participant in Bruce. He smirks back. It's hard to dislike Lois. Still, Bruce feels a shameful satisfaction that Clark remains at *his* elbow.

"I think we occasionally share that pastime" he tells her quietly. Her face becomes puzzled. Clark's blush deepens.

"What does that mean?" The journalist smile comes out. Bruce keeps his calm like a goddamn professional.

He might add a little extra Bruce Wayne, because he's at a party and he has to ham it up, not because of his irrational feelings.

"Clark and I have been spending time together for a little while now." He murmurs, leaning in.

Clark's face is rapidly approaching fuschia in the corner of his eye. His mouth is open.

Lois stares for three quiet seconds. Then her face splits into a grin.

"Clark! I knew you could get any piece of ass you could put your mind to! Why didn't you tell me you had a guy? I'd have stopped bugging you about being a lonely banana!"

Bruce almost chokes. This is so funny. This is too funny. If he laughed a normal amount he'd be laughing right now.

Clark's face is hurtling towards magenta at record speeds.

"I'm so sorry." Says Lois, offering Bruce her hand, "I'm Lois Lane. Clark usually can't shut up about me, but hopefully by now he's learned not to talk about his ex before the third date."

His ex.

"You're my friend!" Clark finally manages, "I talk about you a normal amount!"

Bruce quietly bottles up all of the emotions he's feeling and puts them in the big room in his mind full of his other bottled up emotions. He doesn't usually pretend he'll analyse them later, but this one may be important.

He shakes Lois's hand, looks her in the eye, and tells her, "We don't share *that* flavour of mature nighttime activities, but I'll take it."

He doesn't let go when she pauses in confusion. He can see the cogs turning behind her eyes.

Clark makes a wheezing noise. "Bruce, either tell her or don't. Stop incriminating me in your weird sex persona."

"Persona." Echoes Lois, her eyes narrowing.

"Sorry, sorry, I don't mean to bat around the bush." Bruce grins, ending the handshake.

A few more seconds of processing, then Lois is suddenly *glaring*. It would be more terrifying if she hadn't been congratulating Clark on his sex life mere seconds ago.

"I need verbal confirmation that this man is saying what I think he's saying," she hisses at Clark.

Bruce waggles his eyebrows. Being an unlikable scamp in public has its upsides.

"I'm- it's- yeah, I understand. But you're almost definitely right. He's my- my other best friend. From my extracurriculars."

Lois stares at Bruce. She stares at Clark.

“No no, let’s go back to where I’m a piece of ass” breezes Bruce in his high pitched society voice. Clark elbows him (like a real gentleman).

Lois finally grins. "And here I was about to privately warn Clark against betraying his working class values. Who knows, I probably still will. Do you two wanna go get pho with me sometime? I need to hear the rest of this story."

Clark visibly sags in relief, clinging to Bruce's arm. "This was such a hard secret to keep, I'm so glad I don't have to deal with it anymore."

Lois is a lovely, bright person, Bruce discovers over the next half hour. She takes everything in stride and scares off dozens of unsavoury elites who want to come talk to Bruce Wayne. As the night wears on and Bruce reluctantly gets ready to do some public flirting, Lois asks, “Why don’t you just go home with Clark?”

He almost chokes on the wine he's pretending to sip.

“Huh,” says Clark, “That could probably save him a lot of effort.” He glances at Bruce awkwardly, “unless you wanted to *actually* go home with someone, sorry I didn’t mean to make it sound like you aren’t allowed to enjoy-”

“Have you *met* this crowd. I hope you don’t think my type is *actually* this WASP-y, thank you very much.”

Lois has downed three champagne flutes so far this evening (in celebration of getting some potentially incriminating quotes from the host), so she’s a little flushed when she narrows her eyes and asks, “and what *is* your actual type? The way Clark always talks about you, I figured you were married to science or something.”

Bruce really isn’t sure how to answer that. He decides to deflect, turning on Clark with his full Public Persona and asking, “Oh really? Is that how you talk about me?”

Clark goes bright pink again. *He didn’t blush like this when he thought you were just Bruce Wayne, did he? He’s only flustered because he knows it’s YOU saying it.*

“That’s *not* how I talk about you!” He shoots a glare at Lois, “You’re- you’re just interested in so many things, and you pick up skills quickly, and you have this *laser focus* that’s sorta- it’s contagious, y’know? I was telling Lois about some of the research I was doing, in my spare time. She asked me where I first heard about some of the stuff, and…” He coughs.

Lois dives in with a grin, “He’s selling himself short. Half his free time in the past month has been doing research to understand something you mentioned to him offhand. Then he writes the Wikipedia article on it.”

From a distance, anybody would think that Bruce was laying it on *thick* to the blushing reporter. But Bruce knows, and he’s starting to suspect Lois knows, that Clark isn’t the most flustered one here. Bruce is just very good at keeping his mask on.

He raises an eyebrow at Clark and leans in with an “is that so.”

“Lord help me,” says Clark, “I’m leaving. Stay here or come with, it's up to you.”

***

They leave out the back way. Bruce takes Clark's hand and pulls him, glancing back with the full Bruce Wayne smile. Hardly anyone is watching, though, Clark almost feels like it's a show for *him*.

Which is preposterous, right?

Right?

Especially since the public smile isn't the smile that makes Clark dizzy.

It's raining. Gotham is a deep grey but the streets reflect a golden glow from nearby lamps. Curtains of water sheet down beyond the cosy overhang, glimmering in the warm light.

Gotham's night is grey and gold, and Gotham's knight turns his gaze to Clark. Dark eyes reflect bright rain.

"I love this weather," Batman says. It *is* Batman, too, making the thousand dollar suit look sleek and dangerous. His smile casts sharp angles of shadow over his face, leaving lightning sizzling in the palm of Clark's hands. *That's* the smile that gets him.

It’s the thing about cities, all over again.

Metropolis may be a city, but it’s *different*, somehow, from all the others. It’s a smooth place, full of trees and glass and sunlight. Metropolis is quiet.

When he came to Gotham the first time, he *saw,* finally, what *real* cities are like. They’re jagged and dangerous, sullen, loud. They’re unforgiving and grey. Gotham took all the little things that put Clark on edge, and turned them up to a hundred. Clark hated it.

And then he met Batman, and he realised that he was absolutely right about Gotham. It’s a city of teeth and concrete and shadows.

But that isn’t all it is.

There are nightclubs, full of young people falling in love, and rooftops where families mess around and shoot off fireworks, and soup kitchens full of humidity that clings to the inside of

windows which protect against the cold night. The whole city thrums with *want* and *need*, and that fuels crime and death but it also fuels artists to paint a forest of colour on the underside of a bridge, it fuels graduate students to stay up all night searching for new ways to save the world.

People here say “fuck you” but Clark learned from Batman that they mean, “I love you, you get me, you understand. We all understand, because we’re all in the same place so we know each other better than anyone else in the world.” Gotham dances in the streets to music from an old man who doesn’t even have a tip jar, he just loves to see dance. Food trucks clog parking lots and main streets. Grandmothers shout “good morning” to their neighbour across the light well. Gotham has those tiny cafes in old victorian-style houses, where you can sit in secondhand armchairs and sip hot cocoa so thick it needs a spoon. Gotham breaks open fire hydrants when it gets hot. Gotham will break any law it doesn't like.

Metropolis is completely different.

It took Clark an *age* to understand why that may not be a good thing.

Clark didn’t know what gentrification was until he saw the dozens of little shops pressed together under Gotham's ramshackle apartments, and he realised that smooth, sleek box-store storefronts under skyscrapers *aren’t* what makes a city. Metropolis used to be different, he’s seen the records. Lex Luthor helped it get “clean,” helped fund 'housing projects' that expanded the suburbs into double their old size. The streets are wide enough now that traffic is never a problem, even if they echo with emptiness at night. Pedestrians are few and far between on the well-lit sidewalks.

Clark loves Metropolis, he loves his city and his people, but there’s an ache of loss for the close-knit *community* that struggles to coagulate under the clean, regulated eyes of law and order. He misses having a strong community and it aches all the more for the glimpses he gets of Metropolis’s love shining through like tree roots bursting through asphalt. He’s working on it, he’s working on helping his city.

And Bruce is working on his.

Bruce was born and raised in Gotham. He lives and breathes his city. When outsiders see Gotham, or when they see Batman, they think, “This is the product of a desperate and grim society.” They don’t see the music and the love that hums under every street like a song. They don’t realise that Batman’s fight is a dance. They look so hard at the alleys where people get shot that they don’t see the alleys where children race their bikes.

But Bruce sees both. That's why he fights.

Batman is grim and sharp but he loves passionately, and he helps everyone, and he’s violent sometimes but he’s smiling at Clark in front of the glowing rain and saying, “The air is cleaner after a good storm. Tomorrow will be beautiful.”

And Clark is in love.

***

Later, Bruce will uncork a small bottle of repressed thoughts and wonder, *why did I stop feeling jealous when I discovered they're no longer dating?*

So he'll sit and try to untangle his feelings until he can't stand it anymore, and then he'll go on patrol.

Later, he'll get a text from Clark, a picture of Bruce from behind, looking up and out at the rainy night . No caption.

Later, Alfred will ask him why he didn't sleep last night, and he won't know how to describe the thoughts that have lodged themselves so deep that he spends every waking moment running his mind over them, echoing the repetitive rasp of fingers over a dulled blade.

Chapter End Notes

ouuuugh, I just have a lot of Feelings about cities,,, You need to Understand Cities in order to understand Batman because he is a microcosm of Gotham,,,,

Also, eat your soup now, because the next chapter defies all editing.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> It's Dick Grayson, Bruce's eldest. He used to be Robin, probably. Maybe. It was implied but never confirmed. How weird would it be for him to find a bloody Superman in his dad's house?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I can't believe you let him get away." Batman snarls from the hospital bed.

Barry is worried; He hates seeing his teammates fight. Hawkgirl and Green Lantern are giving each other a Look. Superman seems calm, at least.

"Saving lives always comes first." Superman says, "The whole bridge was going to collapse, I couldn't have just taken off after him."

The other non-injured members of the team start filing out of the room. It's business as usual to them. Barry hates it.

"Do you know how many people he's going to hurt now that he can plan for another attack? You could have delegated the rescues. We could have done more." Batman sits up further, pointing an accusing finger at Superman.

It's more than Barry can take (Barry doesn't have a very high tolerance for argument).

"Guys!" He exclaims. His voice is squeakier than intended. "I know tensions are high, but I really really hate it when you guys have a falling out like this. Can we- can we please be calm about things?"

The other men stare at him. Superman almost drops the batarang he was holding (why is he holding a batarang?). It's unusual to see Superman act like this, there's something *shy* about his body language around Batman recently.

"We're not having a falling out." Superman says, but his face is worried. He turns to Batman. "Are we? You'd tell me if we were having a falling out, right?"

"Of course we aren't. And of course I would." huffs Batman. He glares at Barry but speaks to Superman, "You're an idiot, but that's nothing new."

"I didn't think you'd be this relaxed if we were having a falling out." Superman explains. Batman nods stiffly in agreement. He looks about as relaxed as a diving hawk.

"You guys are weird." Barry manages. "I can't tell if you're joking."

Superman looks confused.

"Are you implying,"Batman says, narrowing his eyes, "that I would have a 'falling out' with Superman because he's *too idealistic?*"

"What? No, I didn't even-"

"Good, because his idealism is crucial to this team."

"I- yeah, I mean I agree! I just thought- you were arguing-"

"Of course we were arguing, I disagree with him. This is going to come back and bite us."

Superman gives them both an 'aw shucks' look, and (without looking) removes Batman's hand from fiddling with the IV in his arm. "You're not taking your IV out yet. It's only been ten minutes."

Barry leaves them to their bickering. They're fucking weird.

***

Bleeding, reads Bruce's message. Then there's just a set of coordinates.

"Aw heck," Mutters Clark instinctively. Bruce had promised not to go on patrol for a week after his most recent injury. It's been two days. Idiot. "Lois, I have to go help a friend really quick. Can you interview Jackson on your own?"

Lois grumbles and sinks lower in the diner booth. "Why even bother having a human life if you're gonna keep interrupting it all the time."

"We've talked about this." Clark says, biting down on his frustration, "you know I can't just not live a life."

She waves him off. "Go. But if Jackson shuts down and gets uncooperative because I don't have a ‘good cop,’ you owe me."

"Jimmy could make it if you called him right now, you're just picky." Clark tells her. Then he's out the door, down an alley, into the sky.

Gotham looms at him in the distance. The anxiety, creeping on the edges of his mind before, hits him full force. He scrambles to bring up the coordinates again, every second eating away at the time between him and Bruce. He shouldn't have warned Lois. He should have just moved.

On the other hand, why would Bruce send something like that via *text?* It must not be *that* bad, right? Clark's brain branches out into millions of scenarios.

When he lands on the rooftop, it takes him a second to spot the hunched form.

Batman grunts a greeting from the ground. Clark is too anxious to think too hard about what's going on with Bruce's leg. Apparently, an artery doesn't bleed out if you hold it closed with your fingers.

Thankfully, it's even less likely to bleed out if you cauterise it shut with your laser vision.

To Clark's horror, Bruce's other leg injuries begin bleeding more heavily when bloodflow is returned. Bruce is starting to lose consciousness. He hasn't even said anything since Clark got here, they've just been silently working in tandem to perform basic field medicine. If Clark's body wasn't hopped up on adrenaline (is it still adrenaline in a Kryptonian?), he'd be a lot more worried. But right now all he can do is find solutions.

"Is it bad enough for a doctor? Should I take you to the cave?" Clark asks urgently.

"Cave" Bruce manages. His eyelids flutter closed. Clark genuinely has no idea whether it's bad enough for a doctor. It certainly was before he got here.

They're at the manor in under a minute, and there's a hole down into the depths of the cave system (there wasn't a hole there before, did someone make the hole for him?) And then there's a mad rush to find the medical area, cutting off Bruce's pants to access the network of deep cuts on the leg.

On some level, he's aware that Alfred is there too, so it's almost a relief when he's pushed aside by a deft pair of hands wielding a needle and thread. Alfred is very capable. He works quickly. *But there's usually more to do, isn't there?*

He rummages in drawers, finding bandages and gauze to put on the table next to Alfred, washing out a dirty wound with saline solution. Everything needs to be *efficient* , or Bruce might die. Hold up, Bruce wouldn't die, right? That's an overreaction? He said he didn't need a doctor.

It doesn't feel like an overreaction. Bruce is pale as a phantom.

He had an IV the other day,

Clark finds an IV bag, hangs it on a stand, arranges what he *hopes* are the right little sealed parts next to it. It's been what, fourty hours since Bruce had finally been allowed to remove the last IV from his arm?

Clark looks over at where Alfred is working. 60 seconds have elapsed. He looks back at Bruce, adrenaline finally fading.

Oh his whole ass is out huh.

Clark *did* cut off his pants.

Alfred catches Clark's gaze, nodding at him. That's probably a dismissal. It's not like there's much more Clark can do.

Outside the door, Clark's heart slows further. The cave is dark. Bats squeak above him, in frequencies that nobody else around here can usually hear. The darkness is just missing the click of a keyboard to make it feel *safe.*

Clark is covered in blood. That's probably an issue. Fixing it requires taking a shower, though, and he doesn't want to go home right now. He needs to stick around for Bruce.

Maybe sunlight will help.

Clark floats up the stairs, slowly. Everything is much slower. Everything is much calmer.

By the time he reaches the foyer, he can hear an approaching car.

He waits for a minute until he can locate it through the door. He can see Jason and a teen who seems a couple years older. Maybe a young adult. Clark struggles to remember where he's seen that face before, maybe–oh! It's Dick Grayson, Bruce's eldest. He used to be Robin, probably. Maybe. It was implied but never confirmed. How weird would it be for him to find a bloody Superman in his dad's house?

The driver stops the car outside. Clark readies himself to flee back into the cave, and then through the door he sees Dick leap out of the car into a series of very familiar handsprings.

Okay. Definitely Robin.

Should I talk to them? Would it be an imposition?

They need to know where their dad is.

Clark slowly cracks open the door once the driver has driven off. He knows he looks like a miserable little creature right now, but what can you do.

"Hello!" He manages. They both stare.

Then Jason drops to his knees with an exaggerated groan, and Dick breaks out a HUGE grin. Clark recognises that grin. It’s familiar enough to undo the knot of tension holding itself in his chest. He knows this kid. It’s hard to stay upset around this kid.

"He told you about his identity!" Dick exclaims, rushing up and wrapping skinny arms around Clark, "he's making progress!"

Jason gestures wildly to Clark. “Dick! He is covered in! Blood! Why are your priorities so fucked up!”

"Oh no," Dick looks perplexed and looks down at his (now very bloody) suit. "did he get himself shot before a *third* one of my visits?"

"It was a knife wound." Clark manages, "I'm bad at assessing damage, but it looked pretty bad?"

Dick makes a face, pushing past Clark into the foyer. "Do we have to get him a transfusion again?"

"I don't… know?"

Both of the boys get a phone notification at the same time. They look at their phones and share a glance.

"Alfred gives it three hours until he wakes up," groans Jason, "he's fine, probably won't be more than a week of recovery."

"We're supposed to get you a shower and some clothes!" Dick adds helpfully. He’s trying to lean his elbow on Jason’s head but it looks like the last time he tried that, Jason was much shorter. Probably less violent too, judging by the immediate jab in the ribs. Maybe Dick is just unafraid of the violence.

Clark finds himself pulled after Dick up the stairs and down a hall while Jason moves off to drop his backpack in his room.

"Here's a guest room!" Dick tells him, "There's an adjoining shower. I'll get you some of Bruce's spare clothes if you want."

Clark manages a small "yes please."

He stands in silence while Dick disappears, staring at the grandeur of the guest room. It’s the size of the living room and kitchen area in his apartment. The ensuite is the size of his bedroom. It’s not filled with riches or gold leaf, but the furniture is very old and very solid, the sheets are very high quality, and the bathroom looks like someone consulted a very competent interior designer before laying the tile. It’s somehow more intimidating than any amount of glitz or glam.

Dick returns with some clothes. "I promised Jason we'd watch some vampire movies from the 80s tonight, if you're interested in joining us."

“I, um, I should probably focus on work, but thank you.”

Dick nods and shuts the door

He’s alone.

It feels almost intrusive to be disrobing in the manor, especially since Bruce didn’t explicitly invite him here. It’s intrusive to step into the gleaming shower and rinse off his naked body under the scorching water. It would probably be even more intrusive to- to…

Clark guiltily reaches out with his hearing and finds the steady heartbeat. He can feel the muscles in his back finally relax, his mind unlatches from its pacing and unravels at the comforting sound. He melts into the shower.

Usually, he tries very hard not to listen to people’s hearts for the same reason he doesn’t peek under other heroes’ masks. It would be invasive, especially if the other person didn’t know he was capable of doing it.

Because he’s given himself permission to be- to break the sanctity of this place, he lets himself think about Bruce. The man who almost-dies on rooftops sometimes. The man who trusts Clark enough to ask for a rescue. He doesn’t ask anyone else for help, not on his own turf, and that…

Well, that means a lot.

Not many people tell Bruce how *good* he is. Clark has seen the newspaper articles. He knows what the press thinks of Batman. And still, Bruce is out there every night, bleeding out without a single affirmation. It’s not like Bruce Wayne gets much more support either.

Clark slips on the sweatpants and the shirt that’s just a little bit too small for him. At least it’s sleeveless so his shoulders aren’t bursting the seams. The clothes are softer than they should be, probably *also* ridiculously high quality.

There’s a knock at the door.

"He's awake," Jason tells him, "Dick is talking to him right now, but Dick promised we'd, uh, do some, other stuff this evening. Robin stuff. So if you want to have a private bedside conversation or whatever, he'll be free soon."

Clark says, "Thank you, Jason." And tries not to smile too much at Jason's embarrassment. *Robin stuff, huh? Not vampire movies?*

***

When Dick gets up to leave, Clark is already leaning in the doorway to the medical room.

He’s staring at Bruce with that same frustrated expression he always wears when Bruce gets hurt. It’s probably a bad sign that Bruce gets hurt often enough to be familiar with the look.

"You're a stubborn bastard," he says when Dick is out the door.

"Glad you're alive too."

"You weren't supposed to be going out yet."

"If you're here to chastise me, Dick did that already."

"No, I just wanted to- listen, just be quiet and let me try to use words."

"You have a degree in that," Bruce points out. He shuts up when Clark gives him a glare of affectionate frustration.

"I just. Wanted to let you know, I appreciate how strong you are. Mentally. No, that sounds like I'm talking about your freakish intelligence."

"I would laugh at that if I laughed at things a normal amount." says Bruce with complete seriousness. A verbal acknowledgement of humour is sufficient replacement for a laugh.

Clark nods, still thinking. "Thank you." There are about ten seconds of silence before he tentatively continues, "You have more willpower than anyone I've ever met. You use it to do amazing things. I." He thinks. Bruce waits.

Almost a minute goes by in silence before he continues, "You are incredible. Your work is incredible. I'm struggling because I need to tell you how *important* you are, and... and how highly I think of you."

Then quieter, softer, "and I'm not just saying stuff because you were hurt, I'm saying it because I keep thinking about it. I keep thinking about everything you do. I think about you all the time. The things you do are- are- geez, I keep using the word 'important' but I don't know what else to call it. I see your achievements and it makes me- hm. I was going to say it makes me love you, and I *do* love you, I love everyone in the league, but there's this specific kind of affection that appears when you're being so… dogged. It makes me want to be my best self."

Clark is so *honest* sometimes that it makes Bruce sick. The man is slightly embarrassed but completely self aware, so he pushes through anyways to deliver as much appreciation as he can. He says "I love you" like other people say "good morning," and he breezes through it like it's obvious, because sure, he's said it before, he says it all the time, but more importantly he's shown it in every action he takes. And he doesn't worry that Bruce might get weird, they both understand he means it platonically, but still.

A part of Bruce wonders, *would anyone even notice if a man like that fell in love? Would he even tell anyone?*

And, well, Clark probably wouldn't. Clark Kent is used to making himself *so* small to make room for Superman, that important, selfish things are waved away.

It's all very familiar to Bruce.

Clark's hands are tracing the edge of a batarang. It's the same blunted batarang. It's starting to wear away- the edges where there used to be blades are now almost completely flat. How

many times has Clark touched it in the past month? He must take it everywhere with him, maybe slipped into work and kept in a pocket the whole time. It's definitely a security risk to his identity.

Bruce isn’t going to point that out.

They lapse into comfortable silence. Clark gets his laptop out ("because I need to make up my absence to Lois").

The man is all soft smiles (*not superman smiles, either*) and

It’s all the drugs , Bruce thinks, *It’s the drugs that make me want*

He falls asleep.

***

In the morning, Clark is gone. There’s a message waiting on Bruce’s phone, though, a picture of the sun rising over the ocean by Gotham.

The air pollution brings out beautiful colours, doesn't it?

It does.

Chapter End Notes

Barry talks like a YouTuber change my mind.

Clark: I am in love with him. What do I do.
Clark, to Bruce: I love you (platonic)

This one is the least well written of the chapters. At least it's long, right?
Also big citation to the Vimes boots theory, it makes me think about rich people's houses differently.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

U two finally smoosh?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"So," Dick says, putting a mug of tea for Bruce on the medical tray by the cot, "you told him?"

"Yes."

Dick raises an eyebrow. He learned that from Bruce. "You trust him a lot more than you ever told me you did."

"Yes."

"Do you want to tell me now?"

Dick isn't going to leave this one alone, is he.

"You know how it is." Bruce says, and starts listing points on his fingers. "He understands my problems. Our strengths on the battlefield are complementary. He is hard to accidentally offend. He is trustworthy. He makes me feel safe."

That last one just slipped out, but it's not untrue. Clark *does* make Bruce feel safe. Physical vulnerability is no longer a problem when they're near each other. Maybe emotional vulnerability isn't either.

Dick is staring at him with an open mouth. "That's the most heartfelt speech I've ever heard you give."

Bruce very pointedly does not wince when Dick breaks into a huge grin. He stays quiet. He's said too much.

"So you two are in a relationship? I'm glad you're opening up to someone new."

Bruce is a professional. He does not wince *or* choke on his coffee. He says, very levelly, "We are not in a relationship."

"Why not?" Dick asks, with an innocent expression (that fools nobody).

Bruce's silence doesn't shake him, and changing the subject would set off alarm bells, wouldn't it.

Bruce says, “I have chosen not to devote my energy to… that.”

"So you have a huge crush that you’re avoiding!" Says Dick, wiggling his eyebrows and ignoring Bruce’s grimace, "he would be lucky to have you."

Dick is guessing wildly in an attempt to make Bruce tell him the truth. He's also probably right on the money. Bruce has been avoiding thinking about his emotional attachment for weeks, but it almost certainly isn’t platonic anymore. Not in the face of that smile, not when Clark asks Bruce to teach him how to dance, or drops everything to save him.

He needs to admit that much to himself.

He takes a deep breath. "I can’t just... I can't do that sort of thing on a whim, Dick. It has to be quantified and… analysed. I would have to be sure of… everything.”

Maybe that admission will satisfy Dick.

He takes after Bruce, so it doesn't. He gives Bruce a peculiar look. “You aren’t usually like this about people.”

“I trust Clark almost as much as I trust Alfred. That is already a lot. He- I- No matter what, his friendship is the most important thing.”

Bruce Does Not Look Away when Dick stares harder.

“It sounds like you already know what you want but you’re scared of change,” says Dick, and when Dick says something you have to think about it, because the kid sometimes knows things about your emotions that you hadn’t even figured out. Even if he's bullshitting half the time.

Bruce thinks.

"No," He says slowly, "change is hard, but it can be worth it."

Dick sips his tea demurely. "Go on."

Bruce doesn't have anything to say.

"Are you worried about being rejected?"

Bruce stares deep into his mug. Of all the reasons to feel this way, that would be the stupidest one. It's completely illogical. It's.

It's accurate, isn't it.

See, Clark's affections are a foregone conclusion; he doesn't feel the same. But Bruce assumes that about everything he shouldn't get his hopes up about. It has to do with

uncertainty. If Clark's feelings *aren't* a foregone conclusion, it makes them an unknown variable. There's nothing Bruce likes less than unknown variables.

Dick can sense he's not getting anything more. "Welp, good talk, good to know you're not making any progress on letting go of your neuroses. I'm gonna go help Jason with his handspring."

It was an enlightening conversation despite Dick's attitude. For all his talk of emotional literacy, he's just a nosy kid when you really get down to it.

Or, not really a kid anymore. Right.

Bruce pointedly doesn't think about rejection. He doesn't imagine how gracious the refusal would be. He doesn't obsess over the unknown quantities that might occur after that, the potential of Clark's lessened intimacy, the likelihood of loss. Bruce *is* afraid of change, when it's unscripted and unplanned. He hates the variability of other people as much as he loves the people themselves.

He's found someone who makes him feel calm and loved, and he doesn't want to risk that unless the data implies it's a *safe* leap to take. And the data implies no such thing.

But it really couldn't hurt, could it, to gather more data.

***

They're side by side in the cave again. Maybe it's routine by now. Or maybe Bruce is just lonely because Dick left yesterday.

Clark is staring at another editing battle (this one several hours old) from another account with a glitched out username.

"Hey Bruce?"

"Mhm?"

"I think the Riddler has been trying to edit Wikipedia."

"He has."

"What?"

"I noticed your editing history and solved his riddle before he was ready for it. It was a nice change of pace."

"You… noticed my editing history?"

"I follow you on Wikipedia."

"You- Bruce, it's not a social media platform, you can't follow people."

Bruce is quiet and keeps typing. Clark takes a second to think.

"You've been tracking *all* my work?"

"I'll stop."

"No! No, you don't have to. I mean, in the future don't do that sort of thing to anyone without asking, but it's fine for me. I'm just surprised you found it interesting."

Bruce stops typing and turns to look at Clark. Clark is glad he isn't expected to return the eye contact. He also tries very hard not to look at the shape of Bruce's neck. He's been trying very hard not to look at a lot of things recently.

"You're a journalist. You've won awards for your journalism. You seriously don't think anyone would want to read what you write?"

"Yesterday I spent half an hour just adding citations to the article on zoopharmacognosy. That does *not* sound riveting."

Bruce turns back to his computer with that private smile. "To many people it isn't, but it is to you, and it is to me too."

Clark is Very Full of Feelings. He takes a moment, allowing himself to look at Bruce; ramrod straight posture, tousled hair from the cowl, squared shoulders…

"I can see you staring at me in the monitors. Did I say something wrong again."

"No," says Clark, "I just think you're amazing."

And that's probably all he can say, because his brain is just *wailing* with affection. Too much affection. Clark can't feel anything by halves. When he was little, his parents were very kind about it, but he always had to be so… careful. Around the livestock, around his friends, around everyone, he was always a little bit too loud, and if he got too excited or affectionate, well, he had the strength of a god. He could hurt someone. His parents had been very kind and thoughtful but even they didn't think it would be a good idea for him to hold any small, cute animals until he was almost nine.

Everything is delicate, and Clark breaks things when he's affectionate, he hurts people's ears when he's happy, he smothers people when he's in love. So the urge to be small overwhelms him automatically, smothering the feelings.

Be normal. Be quiet.

What's a normal, quiet way of dealing with this?

Lois? He texts.

Wassup smallville

He spends a while trying to formulate a sentence.

He settles on, *It's Bruce,* because that sounds like a noncommittal way of communicating.

U two finally smoosh?

Clark stares at his phone. He looks over at Bruce. He looks back at his phone.

Lois, are you drunk?

Just tipsy

I'll get back to you about this when you're sober.

I don't meed to bensober. You spend like ten hiurs a week just talking about nerd shit with him it's pretty clear u want to have his babdis

Please turn on spell check.

YOU re avoiding the POINT

What's the point?

The point is urbalways scared to do stuff you want to do just bc of Superman

Superman is important, Lois

Superman isn't the real u clark and that's disappointing to other peoplbut it doesn't stop you from wanting stuff?

Okay, Clark takes a deep breath and types, *let's assume I'm an emotionally healthy person who feels allowed to want things even if they could affect the justice league's teamwork. What do I do then?*

Tell him how younfeel, stupid

Logically I know that's a good choice but I don't think he's even interested in me.

Flirt to ser if he likes hou

Lois, you know this firsthand, I Cannot Flirt. People assume I'm flirting when I'm just being nice and they assume I'm just being nice when I flirt. I always make a fool of myself.

Well if he laughs at you youkl know hes not interested

:(

But. He trusts Bruce to tell him no, or to ask him to stop, or even to tell him he's foolish and stupid. If Clark just… takes off the breaks a bit, he'll find where the boundaries are. He'll find them falling on this side of platonic and then he can say he was true to himself, pat himself on the back, let go of any stray feelings, and make himself small again. Letting himself be big is always the easiest way to drive someone off.

It's unimaginable that Bruce might not be deterred.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter. The boys need help with their feelings. Tomorrow we get a long chapter.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

"I don't want you to help me just because you feel like you have to."

There's a very pointed pause, then, "is that why you help me?"

"No! I meant, like, I feel guilty just being another person you have to save."

"You could never 'just' be someone I save."

Chapter Notes

Additional content warning for this chapter available in the notes at the end, just in case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce gets a text from Clark, two days later.

Hey, there's something up with my powers, I was hoping you could help me figure it out?

I'll be there in an hour.

No! It's fine, it's just my vision that was weird, it's almost better now. I got a faceful of kryptonite dust the other day and there was some stuff that wasn't wearing off right away. I hoped you could help me figure out how to stop it happening again.

When would be a good time for you.

I'm not the one who's limited by transportation time, when's a good time for you?

What about tonight.

After the art exhibit opening?

I can blow off the exhibit.

Please don't, I have to be there. Lois thought it would be funny to tell Perry I'm a good fit to fill in for society stuff. You're my only hope.

It's not fun to be around me in public, Clark.

Honestly it seems like it's less fun to BE you in public

That one stings with accuracy.

I still have to talk to people and make my rounds, Bruce texts, *I have to be seen.*

And here I thought you were going to blow it off

Bruce needs a second to think. Clark doesn't want to be alone at the party. Clark is willing to hang out with an extremely embarrassing person to do so, even if it might permanently alter both of their public images.

He's been typing and deleting for too long, because Clark says, *It's fine not to go, I can take care of myself, but we could find a fun story and put on a bit of an act if you wanted. Play it up so they don't think you're going soft.*

I don't remember you being much of an actor.

You see me turn up the stoicism every day, and the bashfulness comes naturally ;)

You've thought up an entire plot already, haven't you.

You make it sound competent or scripted lol

Just tell me.

No no I'm really savouring the idea that I make good plans now

You always make good plans. Tell me what it is.

Then why do you always veto my plans?

I make better ones.

:(

Tell me your idea.

Bruce Wayne wants to be pals with Clark Kent. Clark doesn't care for him. Bruce keeps trying despite my raging socialism. Everyone knows it's a lost cause.

Three questions. One, we left a party together the other night. People saw that. Two, Bruce Wayne isn't exactly wanting in friends (unlikeable though they may be). Three, I like your socialism.

Clark is typing for a while.

One, we have plausible deniability because I was seen walking to my car alone afterwards. Two, you could play it as seeking a sexual conquest if you wanted, but I figured that would

make you more uncomfortable, so maybe you want something else from me (a positive interview?). Three, none of those were questions, Bruce! Is this how you talk to criminals? How do they know what to answer in an interrogation?

The same way that you do. You're suggesting that Bruce should strike out with you repeatedly? It will only work once or twice.

That's probably long enough to convince Perry that Lois was full of crap. Unless you wanted to keep it up, in which case I'd be willing to go to parties with you in my spare time haha, as long as I don't have to wear a suit that fits.

Clark is… He's volunteering to go to parties to get flirted at, just to help out a friend. This would usually sound a little bit gay, but Clark is the kind of person who says everything with an earnest heart and very little subtext. He's so confident in his masculinity that if he *is* straight (and he almost definitely is), he'd probably still offer to suck a dick if he thought it would help a friend.

Sorry, says Clark, *you can tell me if I'm being weird. I would never want to make you uncomfortable.*

It's a familiar game, a delicate game, but Bruce has played it before and if it's played right, there's no harm in it. It's not like he'll get his hopes up. The same-sex nature of their friendship only makes it more… precarious.

It's a good plan, says Bruce, *I'll see you tonight.*

Clark sends a thumbs up and a picture of a cat in a tree.

***

The truth is that Clark was fully aware of Lois's plans to make Perry send him to parties. He didn't put up more than a perfunctory fuss, because honestly he...

Well, he doesn't know what he's doing, but it doesn't seem like it could hurt. He just wants more time with Bruce that doesn't involve someone almost dying.

The exhibit opening is a big deal because someone rich did the art. It means everyone attending is rich and knows everyone else, which means someone has to report on what they're saying to each other. That being said, Perry might let Clark focus on the nepotism angle (the artist's parents made huge contributions to the museum). It could be a good story.

It's not a good exhibit.

The art is abstract, which Clark already struggles to understand, but it isn't abstract in that flawless and vast way that Clark has enjoyed in the past. It's cluttered and cramped and unpleasant to look at, which is probably a deliberate choice. All Clark knows is that it's not enjoyable or impressive to his amateur eye. He focuses instead on interviewing the guests (and trying not to lean too hard into the nepotism angle).

On top of it all, he still has a headache.

"You're a reporter, right?" Asks someone behind him.

He almost expects it to be Bruce, but Bruce usually doesn't show up this early (read: within half an hour of the start of the party). Instead, it's an older man with a crew cut and an expensive watch.

"I heard you talking to someone else." He says, and offers his hand. "Robert Hobbes, you can call me Bert. My daughter did the art here. You're also from the Midwest?"

On one hand, this is a good interview opportunity. On the other hand, Bert seems to have zeroed in on Clark for *all* the wrong reasons. His handshake screams of trucknuts and his breath reeks of alcohol.

"I'm from Kansas, yes." Clark says (keeping his cool like a real champ), "Clark Kent, Daily Planet, I'd love to ask you some questions about your daughter? And I understand you made some substantial donations to the museum as well?"

"Well, you know." The man wrinkles his nose a little and leans in, "my wife does all those things. I don't care how the money is spent as long as we're getting tax breaks for it. You know how it is when you're married."

Clark tries very hard to keep his expression polite. The man is on the record and he's saying some stupid things. The trucknuts attitude just has to be used to Clark's advantage, right?

His headache is getting worse.

"I'm afraid I'm not married so I wouldn't know. Is your wife here today?"

Bert rolls his eyes. "She said she was sick and made me to go instead of her. Never get married, young man. A woman will be the death of you."

Clark lets himself give up. He's attending an event, not angling for a pulitzer. A scoop isn't worth tangling with these vibes.

"Well, thank you for the comments. I think I have to move on to ask your daughter some questions, Mr. Hobbes."

"Oh, there'll be a special thingy for the press to ask her questions. A panel, later. You don't have to be interested in art right now, I saw how you were looking at it."

Clark hesitates and glances around the room. No excuses, nobody to save him. "I *am* interested in art, Mr. Hobbes."

"You can be honest with me, Kent." (Clark tries desperately to back away but there's a group of people blocking his way) "I'm lost as to why all this stuff matters to Kathy. If I wasn't trying to be polite I'd say she just wants the attention."

Clark is genuinely speechless. In a fit of spite and desperation, he pointedly looks at his notebook and writes that last bit down.

Something in Hobbes' demeanour changes. "That wasn't for an interview."

"I wasn't aware we were that familiar, Mr. Hobbes, I'm just trying to do my job."

Hobbes takes a swipe for the notebook (he must have consumed more alcohol than Clark thought). Clark pulls it back out of his reach, but the back of his hand hits someone standing behind him. Its-

Oh thank goodness.

"Well, I'm no editor, but I *can* take a look at your work if you want me to," drawls Bruce Wayne, plucking the notebook out of Clark's hand. He flips through it and makes a face at the shorthand. "Encoding your notes from the rest of us, are you? You'll have to translate this for me... Somewhere private." He offers a fat wink to Hobbes and slides an arm around Clark's shoulder, steering him away from the conversation. "In the meantime, please explain this art to me, I simply can't understand it."

Clark can feel himself relaxing as they move away. "Thanks for the assist."

"No problem at all. I'm just surprised he wanted anything to do with you."

"Well. He didn't by the end."

Bruce laughs that fake bubbly laugh, and Clark can feel eyes on them. "The fate of a journalist, eh? You're lucky I'm not put off by your endless questions." Then he lowers his voice, leaning close and pushing the notepad back into Clark's hands. "I wasn't aware you were reviewing the art, but I assure you that your interpretations of the paintings are thoroughly lacking context."

Of course he read my notes. Of course he can read shorthand.

Bruce winks (and looks beautiful doing it), "no wonder you attract other people who can't understand art."

Clark smiles and blushes despite himself, rolls his eyes. "I'm surprised you weren't more chummy with him. You seem wealthy and male enough that he'd respect you."

"Oh goodness no," Bruce waves an airy hand, "he thinks I'm far too fruity to be associated with."

And *what does something like that mean*.

Bruce snags a drink from a tray and tilts his head to assess the party. Clark is suddenly hyperaware that Bruce doesn't have a date tonight, does he.

"It's quite an assumption," Bruce mutters, "given that the papers have never caught me kissing a man."

There's some sort of emphasis on the word 'caught,' and Clark can't tell if it's his imagination. He can't tell if he's supposed to interpret it Like That. He can feel himself settling into a blush he'll probably be wearing for the rest of the evening.

Suddenly the room jolts. He tightens his grip on Bruce's arm, assumes something more of a defensive stance.

"What's wrong." Bruce asks, voice suddenly hushed and gravelly (*not his Bruce Wayne voice,*)

The room continues to tip, starts to spin.

"I'm getting dizzy. It happened earlier, before my vision started going on the fritz."

"How long did it last, last time."

"Like two hours… I thought I got over the worst of it, this is so stupid."

"We should take you home."

"Already? The exhibit hasn't even…" Clark cuts himself off and leans harder on Bruce, closing his eyes.

Bruce starts walking them towards the door. "It's hardly the first time I've left early for the sake of a beautiful face."

They're out the door and heading down the front steps now.

“Bruce”

“Yes?”

“I’m, I’m freaking out a little, can I listen to your heartbeat?”

“Listen to my…?”

“Sorry, it’s just something to focus on, you know? It’s very steady. You're always very steady. But it feels… it feels intrusive.”

“Clark. You don’t have to ask to listen to my heart. I don’t care what you listen to.”

“You obviously DO care, though. You always care about your privacy.”

Bruce pulls Clark’s arm further up his shoulder. He says, at a volume only audible to Kryptonians, “I trust *you* with my private affairs.”

Clark Is Not Going To Start Crying In Public Because That Would Give People The Wrong Idea.

They get to the car and Clark has to close his eyes. The spinning is just too fast and he's starting to get x-ray flashes of people's ribcages and the mantle of the earth when he keeps them open. Bruce's heart is steady and calm.

"I made Alfred take a day off, so I'll be driving," Bruce is saying, "if you need to vomit please try to tell me beforehand."

"Being dizzy doesn't make me throw up," Clark manages.

Bruce sits him in the car and gets in the driver side, starting the engine and immediately accelerating too much to be legal, probably. Clark isn't going to open his eyes to check the speedometer.

"I'm sorry. We keep being sick and needing help."

"That's what we do, Clark. We help each other."

"I don't want you to help me just because you feel like you have to."

There's a very pointed pause, then, "is that why you help *me*?"

"No! I just meant, like, I feel guilty just being another person you have to save."

"You could never 'just' be someone I save."

Bruce's tone is quieter than usual. Clark takes a peek at him, but he can't focus on his face. He closes his eyes immediately when he accidentally catches a glimpse of Bruce's bare chest.

It thoroughly prevents him from formulating a response. In fact, he's still thinking about the network of pale scars when they arrive at the apartment.

The dizziness is worse now. He tries to float a bit so Bruce doesn't have to carry him but ends up moving sideways instead of up. Bruce hauls him bodily to his doorway and leans him against the doorframe.

"Keys?"

Clark hands Bruce his keys. There's lots of clinking and then they're through the door, up the stairs, into the warm little cubby of Clark's apartment. Bruce sets him down on the couch.

"You said it came on after you inhaled some dust." Bruce says. He must be kneeling on the floor *right* in front of Clark from how close he sounds. Or maybe Clark's ears aren't working.

"That was a week ago. I was feeling normal until last night, then this morning..."

"I'd like to inspect your eyes, can you open them?"

Uh oh.

"I don't think you want me to do that. My x-ray vision is all over the place right now."

"So?"

"So I might- I might accidentally, look through your clothes,"

"So?"

"I-"

"I do not care. I want to help you."

Clark opens his eyes. He almost closes them again on reflex. Bruce is only inches away, staring at his face intently.

"I'm going to shine a light in your eyes, can you try to follow it?"

Clark nods, trying not to look at the inside of Bruce's skull.

"Follow the light?"

Clark is trying to focus but he's stuck staring into the next apartment over.

"Can you see it?"

"I can't focus that close."

Bruce turns off the light with a click and then huffs audibly. Clark closes his eyes again

"Do you have any medical information on Kryptonian respiratory systems?"

"Not- not *with* me, no. There's something different about my lungs but I can't remember the specifics."

"I was wondering more about sinuses. In humans, the inner ear, nose, throat, and eyes are all connected. The same may be true of you."

"You think I have kryptonite stuck in my nasal cavity or something?"

Bruce grunts noncommittally. “I’m going to get you something from the store.” Clark feels a small object placed into his hand. “You can reach me on this comm if you need to. Will you be alright staying here alone for fifteen minutes?”

“Mhm”

“Good. I’ll be back.”

Bruce leaves. Clark gropes with a hand and finds the batarang on his coffee table. It's starting to look skinnier than it did before, the reinforced materials have been sanded down deeply just by Clark's persistent fingertips. It's reassuring under his touch.

You are loved. You are trustworthy. You deserve good things.

You are not alone.

Bruce comes back twenty minutes later and starts puttering around in the kitchen.

"What did you get?"

"A neti pot. I don't know the full extent of what's going on with your eyes and your sense of balance, but if you *do* have sinuses, it would be important to flush them out after kryptonite inhalation."

The neti pot is a gross experience but Bruce is very kind about it. Clark successfully talks Bruce out of sticking a probe up his nose. Bruce puts on a podcast, orders them food, tips the delivery driver two hundred dollars.

And eventually, the world stops spinning.

"I'm feeling better." He peeks out at where Bruce is absentmindedly picking at his poke dish. "I think- I think it's over."

"Good. Can I examine your eyes again?"

And that means Bruce gets close again, turning on the light. Clark's world is full of cologne with undertones of industrial metals. Bruce already has that slight stubble that only Clark ever notices because of his enhanced vision. Bruce's lips are-

He isn't going to think about Bruce's lips. He focuses on the light instead. He can feel Bruce's breathing, the intense concentration directed straight at his body, at his eyes, at *him.*

It's. Somewhat arousing.

Hm.

Bruce finally leaves when he needs to patrol. He promises to answer any comms, he puts Clark's leftovers in the refrigerator, then he's gone and Clark is suddenly alone in his apartment, with a million thoughts and a traitorous imagination.

Was that something? That wasn’t anything, right?

Right?

***

“Clark?”

It’s Cat Grant. Clark half expected her to corner him in the breakroom at some point (with questions about Bruce), but judging by her face she's here with something more serious.

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“There’s some pictures going around the internet, I wanted to check in with you about them.”

This is uncharacteristically gentle from Cat. He’s only ever seen her this gentle before when Lois’s cousin died. Something is wrong.

“What’s the picture, Cat?” It couldn’t be about Superman, right? It couldn’t?

She hesitates heavily. “Before I show you, I just want you to know that I’m here for you whatever happens. I’m not going to pry you for a source on this one.”

Clark is starting to panic. “Show me the picture.” It's Superman. She knows. She-

She holds up her phone. It’s a picture of Bruce and Clark at the entrance to Clark’s apartment. Clark is slumped against the wall and Bruce is flipping through the keys on Clark’s keyring. It’s the sort of picture paparazzi often takes of Bruce.

Cat swipes to the next picture. Bruce has the door open and is hauling Clark through.

Clark tries to swipe again, but there isn’t more.

“I don’t get it.”

Cat has that gentle look on her face again. “Clark, do you remember this?”

“No yeah, I had a, um, a vertigo attack. I was feeling pretty sick.”

“Did he give you anything to drink?”

“Yeah, he- wait. Hold up. What are you implying?”

Cat is quiet but her concern is apparent. Shit.

“Cat. Listen to me. I was feeling sick all day at work, remember? Lois can tell you, I kept making typos because I was having trouble focusing on my screen. It got really bad at the party, so Bruce took me home and got me a glass of *tapwater.*”

Cat looks relieved. “Right. Thank you, I just needed to check. There are people on the internet who are saying… Well, they say the man only wants one thing, you know? But I'm glad it's not like that.”

The panic and worry are giving way to anger, now. “What are people saying.”

"I know they're wrong to jump to conclusions. It just doesn't look good.”

“Cat. I know for a *fact* that Bruce Wayne would *never* do *anything* without consent. And you can *quote* me on that.”

A reporter using words like those is like a wizard casting a spell. Cat's eyebrows shoot up. “Well. Okay, then.”

He’s angry all the way back to his desk, where he opens up his phone and…

Well, what’s he going to say to Bruce? '*Don’t worry, I’m fixing this*?' '*I’m sorry I fucked up your image?*'

He settles on, *Thank you again for helping me last night*.

Lois has been trying to get him to say “thank you” instead of “I’m sorry” more often. She’d be proud.

The rest of the day is Not Good. Half the office is being uncharacteristically nice to him. It’s extremely unpleasant to know why.

When Lois stops by his desk at 3, he’s barely keeping a lid on his social anxiety.

“Clark, I was wondering if you’d seen the-”

“I have! It’s all anyone has been thinking about around here all day!”

“...The Gotham Gazette article that came out 4 minutes ago?”

“Oh. Uh, no. What’s it about?”

“You.”

“Damn it.”

He pulls it up on his computer. The headline is, ‘Doorway Dawdlings Highly Consensual.’

It just gets worse from there. At least it’s not… the earlier kind of bad, but this article latched onto the quote Clark gave Cat (published in a quick online article) and turned it up to 10. Apparently they have detailed photographs of every time Clark Kent has been even remotely

close to Bruce Wayne in the past… well, ever. Clark should have assumed they did, Bruce *is* a celebrity, after all. It was stupid thinking otherwise.

But the worst part of the article is the conclusion they draw.

‘It may have been love at first sight: since the two first met, our favorite floozy hasn’t taken home a single girl! Could the much-memed reporter really have the charm to turn him gay overnight? One thing is for certain, the women of Gotham are begging to be a fly on that wall.’

Lois is watching Clark when he finishes reading. He probably looks slightly nauseous.

“I didn’t expect it to be so…”

“Offensive?”

“I was going to say fetishistic, but yeah. I don’t like the idea that people are paying attention, let alone…”

Lois nods. “Are you doing okay? The media isn’t really in a frenzy about this, I’m pretty sure most people think it’s a bit of a stretch. It’ll probably be a non-issue in a week.”

Clark feels dirty. He doesn’t like the feeling that people see him and Bruce, together, and their first act is objectification. And on some level, Clark feels like he isn’t better than any of them; there are thousands of people who have fantasies about Bruce Wayne, what makes him any different?

It’s imperative that Bruce feels like a person, even if he sometimes doesn’t treat himself like one. Clark knows what it's like, to not be a person. He would never want Bruce to feel that way.

In the meantime…

“Come on,” says Lois, “Let’s go out for drinks.”

He runs a finger over the fragile, eroded metal of the batarang in his pocket. Surely he can be a person, relax a bit, for just one afternoon?

***

"Superman?" Asks Diana, "are you in here?"

She knows he is. He knows she knows he is. She steps further into the towering, unstable rubble that remains of the building.

"It is more difficult to clean up the hazardous debris without you" she says, "we are doing our best, but the others are worried. Are you alright?"

She spots him hunched up in a corner, elbows on knees and hands in hair. His body shudders in a way human bodies usually don't.

"Is it an injury?"

He waves a shaking hand in dismissal, dead silent. The man doesn't need to breathe, but if he did she suspects he would be hyperventilating right now. His muscles jump oddly beneath the skin.

Between his feet lie two small pieces of metal, flat and worn down. There's a fresh break between them where they must have been attached.

"Is this about the projectile that hit the skyscraper?" It was the size of a house. Superman was late to the battle and hadn't been there to prevent the impact.

He tenses even further, squeezing his fists on his knees, trying to make himself smaller. He doesn't seem to be responding to her.

There is someone he might respond to, though, if she is correct about what those metal pieces used to be.

"Batman," she says, approaching the man in the shadow. He spent the last fifteen minutes remotely organising the team's cleanup efforts, staying far from the rapidly assembling media and emergency response personnel.

"Toxic contaminants have been contained. I recommend throwing them into the sun. Where is Superman?"

She gives him an 'It's-not-pretty,-please-see-for-yourself" grimace and directs her gaze meaningfully at the half-collapsed building. He stares blankly at her.

Then suddenly he's folding up his analysis device and pouring off towards the building in a fluid run.

When Superman emerges ten minutes later, he swoops in front of the waiting cameras to be seen and carries the contaminated materials into space.

Diana sees, though, the way Batman watches him go, pulling his gauntlets on and rubbing his hands–trying to chase the feeling of warm palms across his own. She sees the glint of a brand new batarang between Superman's fingers and the way he glances back before stepping out in public.

She's glad their team is strong.

***

At 8pm, Clark is exhausted. Maybe a little fragile from the mission. Maybe he still wants to cry.

Cat sent him a text while he was out (he doesn't even know how she got his number);

Heeey since u love seeing Bruce Wayne u probably wouldn't mind commuting to Gotham for the benefit ball tomorrow would u?

Cat, I have deadlines. I can't drop everything to go to a party.

I will owe you a medium favor. Please? My sister just had her baby and I'll save you the tea but her husband is NOT helping out enough

Medium large favor.

HELL yeah! It's a deal!

So maybe Clark likes finding excuses to see Bruce. So what. He's allowed to be big, remember? He's allowed to be clingy. It's all part of the plan to scare Bruce away.

He touches the brand new batarang on the table. Bruce said, while sitting next to Clark in the rubble, "guilt is the most human emotion you can feel." Bruce said, "you don't have to let them take pictures." Bruce held Clark's hand and talked him through the shuddering panic. Batman always has Superman's back, but nobody has Bruce's back when *he's* swamped by the cameras and the weight of the world.

Clark wonders if his interference the other night actually helped.

Then again, if Clark *can* help, he *always* has to try.

They help each other, that's just what they do.

Chapter End Notes

Content Warning: In this chapter, someone comes to the (false) assumption that someone else was drugged and potentially assaulted.

Extra long chapter to make up for yesterday, but it does drag a little bit in the middle, sorry about that. Happy new year.

Bruce: I'm fruity
Clark: this must mean he's straight AND homophobic

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Clark is having A Difficult Time.

Chapter Notes

Bruce is a dramatic idiot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce was expecting to have a terrible evening at the ball. He was not expecting, before he walked in (an hour late), to see Clark Kent talking to the host.

Clark is taking fastidious notes with a shy smile and an amiable hunch, charming the socks off his interviewee, probably by accident.

He's gorgeous. He may be playing up his body language and slicking back his hair, but he's gorgeous. The thick glasses only work to frame the blue of his eyes. Probably nothing could stop him from being the most beautiful man in the world.

And then Bruce remembers Clark probably doesn't want to see him right now, not outside of a mission, not after that article came out, so he folds up all his emotions into a little ball and walks towards the drinks buffet. He probably needs to drink at least two real ones if he's going to survive this.

He should have warned Clark not to make any comment, it's not like Clark knows how to navigate gossip journalism from the other side. He should have reminded him not to give them any more fuel. But knowing Clark, this probably would have happened anyways. He just can't let an injustice lie.

It's going to be a long evening.

“Bruce?”

He’s right there, at Bruce’s elbow, smiling like nothing could be wrong. (*that smile! Bruce’s favourite smile!*)

“Are you doing okay?”

“As well as I can be, given the circumstances. It’s good to see you.”

“The circumstances being the ball? Or- ohhhhh. I am so sorry about that.” And then, before Bruce can open his mouth, Clark winks at him. “Didn’t mean to turn you gay.”

A beat.

Bruce laughs.

His laugh–his *real* laugh, is a rare thing. It’s deep and quiet and only comes out when he’s truly overwhelmed with the humour of a situation. The discomfort and worry of the past day melts away, especially when Clark smiles at him like his laugh is diamonds and rubies. It's lost in the noise of the room, but Clark hears *everything,* doesn’t he.

He probably heard the relief in Bruce’s heartbeat when he showed up and started making conversation.

“Hey, there’s a reason I agreed to fill in for Cat tonight. You made me a promise.”

Bruce racks his brain to remember a promise. Clark takes his hand–it’s an easy gesture but it makes Bruce’s breath hitch–and nods his head towards the- oh.

The dance floor, where almost two dozen people are dancing.

Clark is underdressed for dancing, but it’s *really* not the sort of thing that Bruce cares about as long as Clark doesn’t.

“Do you know the basics of a waltz?” Bruce asks. Clark shoots back a ‘*what do you think'* look.

Bruce leads them to a back corner of the dancing area, leans in closer. He’s trying very hard not to think about what this looks like, what the paparazzi must think. He’s also trying very hard not to breathe too deep or he might discover what Clark smells like. That would probably fuck him up a lot more than all the papparazzi in the world.

“Alright. You’re going to be leading. Leading is usually easier once the dance gets more complicated. That means you put your hand *here,* and *here* . Now, look at our feet…”

It’s straw. Clark smells like warm, dusty straw, like hot fields of dry grass. It’s a delicious smell. They’re close, both looking down at their feet, faces inches apart, and they’re excruciatingly public, and Clark Kent smells like a clean barn on a hot day. His thumb traces mindlessly over Bruce's hand. His brows are knotted in concentration and he’s biting the inside of his lip, doing his best to follow directions and move with Bruce’s feet. His glasses are falling low on his nose.

Bruce didn't notice the strength of his own feelings before now, in the same way that you might not notice the sun rising when you're still hard at work: it's vitally important but not mission relevant. It's gradual, dependable, it feels as natural as breathing. It’s almost a relief.

It’s also unbearable, in a way.

“Alright, now we step in time with the music. Count it out with me beforehand. Ready? *One* two three, *four* five six, *one* two three, *four* five six. Now let’s try to follow with our feet…”

Clark is flushed, smiling down as he tries to keep time with the music. Bruce thought he had catalogued all the smiles, but this one is new. It's warm, almost humorous, like they're sharing a joke that the rest of the world doesn't get.

And then the song ends but another song doesn’t start; it’s time for the speeches. They stand on the dance floor, staring into each other’s eyes and just. Breathing. Bruce isn’t sure if he’s misreading signs, he’s usually good at reading situations correctly but it’s so *important* to get things right, and Clark is always affectionate with his friends, isn’t he-

“That’s what you get for arriving late” Clark says with a dimpled grin, and gestures towards the far side of the room, at a cluster of people with cameras watching them. “I think the other reporters want some time with you too, Mr. Wayne.”

And then this motherfucker *winks*. It's *saucy.* Since when does Clark wink like that? It should be illegal. Fuck.

Bruce is very, very off his game for the rest of the evening. Everyone notices, especially the press, but it’s not like Bruce asked to be ambushed and asked to dance. Any media speculation from here on out is completely Clark’s fault.

He has the feeling, though, that Clark knows exactly what he’s getting into. And that would mean Clark thinks Bruce is worth spending time with. Worth it enough for all the rest to be bearable.

Is Clark flirting or just being friendly? Clark is very friendly with everyone, this could just be what men who are close friends do in Kansas. Bruce can't be certain, and he can't act on

uncertainty.

He needs more data.

***

Nice , Texts Lois, *laying it on thick* .

She links a social media post, a picture of Clark and Bruce dancing at the back of the venue.

He seemed really on edge, I think he hated it. There were lots of people taking pictures and I think it upset him.

Why would it upset him? People take pics of him all the time?

It's ruining the whole playboy thing he tries so hard to keep up. I don't want to mess up his public image.

Honey, from what you've told me, the man is a champion at telling people no.

I guess.

He turns the corner and sees the train station a few blocks down. The pain in the ass about being seen with Bruce Wayne is that he can't fly home afterwards, he has to have train ticket receipts and all that nonsense.

Still worth it.

Then he hears the footsteps. There's someone--two people--following him. Oh boy, that's not good, he even changed out of his fancy clothes to walk to the station, just to avoid that sort of thing. He can't remember what to do in this situation. Turn around? Make a phone call? Cross the street?

He settles for walking faster. It doesn't work. A hand comes down on his shoulder.

At least he only has $30 in his wallet.

"It *is* Bruce Wayne's boyfriend." Says the person behind him.

Well, crap.

***

Bruce puts on the cowl and feels himself relax. He's constantly aware of his surroundings, sprung up to move at any moment, but it's *simpler* behind the mask. He just has to worry about the world, not how the world might interpret him. The bat has a fairly straightforward public image, one that he doesn't need to put much effort into. He can enjoy the things he enjoys, he can use the tools he makes, and he doesn't have to be polite about it or justify himself to anyone.

Jason is at home, working on an essay. Bruce is all alone in the shadows, watching and patrolling.

Police chatter ticks up. There's been a kidnapping, apparently, someone asking for ransom from-

He can feel his heart drop when the call comes in from Alfred. *For fucks sake*.

***

"Hey there, you." Says Clark, as soon as Batman is close enough to hear him. Honestly, who thought it was a good idea to tie up their hostage in a basement *alone?* He stares through the sack on his head to watch his friend.

Bruce's feet hesitate, then pace past the basement window towards the main entrance to the house. Ballsy. If Clark didn't know better, he'd think Bruce was showing off. Maybe Clark doesn't know better.

The familiar heartbeat remains steady–Clark watches through the wall as Bruce enters through the heavily guarded front door *without being seen,* knocks out one guard (of six total) and makes his way downstairs. He's probably a terrifying figure to anyone who hasn't heard him talk about use of leverage in jiu jitsu for three hours straight.

He stands in front of Clark, not smiling but smug all the same.

"Are your glasses on?"

"They fell off but they're kicking around in the bag on my head. I think they're broken."

"The bag stays on, then."

Bruce undoes the feeble handcuffs keeping Clark attached to the chair. "You could have plausibly broken these."

"Do I *look* like I know what plausibly breakable handcuffs look like? No, don't give me that look, I really don't have the time for a seventy page slideshow. Not until Friday at least."

He follows Bruce down the hallway. It's funny, a little bit ridiculous, that Clark is being saved, but it's probably better all around, right? It would be a pain in the ass to manufacture his own escape without giving himself away.

In the hallway upstairs, Bruce *takes his hand, oh*, and pulls him toward the back door.

"There's someone outside that door" whispers Clark.

Bruce nods, raises a finger to his lips for quiet (his lips are chapped, why are Batman's lips always more chapped than Bruce Wayne's?) and tosses something down the hall before pulling Clark into a hallway closet.

It's a small closet. They're big men. On some level, Clark knows that this mission could be completed with a lot less stealth, but Bruce probably has his reasons.

Normal reasons. Probably.

The man's head is tilted to listen, looking over his shoulder in the closet. The cape lies in heavy folds over his shoulders. He smells like aluminium and faintly of sweat. His cheekbones could kill a man.

Fuck,

Someone down the hall starts shouting. There are footsteps, raised voices. Clark would look at what's going on, but he's looking at Bruce instead…

"Has your mask always been coated with lead?" Clark resists the temptation to reach out and run a thumb down the cowl.

Bruce opens the door of the closet and pulls Clark after him, through the newly abandoned back door and into the yard behind the townhouse. There's an apartment building nearby, close enough for Bruce to get a grapple on, and put his arm around Clark and golly they are just pressed up against each other aren't they. This is necessary to the mission, right? That's why Bruce is holding his waist like this?

He floats a little to make sure he isn't weighing Bruce down on the ascent.

On the rooftop, Bruce pulls the bag off his head. It's an instinct to check for injury, probably, to tilt up Clark's chin, to lean in and scan his face.

"I added lead to my cowl soon after I met you," He says (just casually continuing the conversation), "I kept it just in case, but apparently it did not need to serve its original purpose. Why are you trying to look through it now?"

Clark frowns slightly. "Do I need a reason to want to see your face?"

A long pause.

"No. You don't."

It is truly impossible to tell what Bruce is thinking. Maybe Clark's social skills are just that bad, maybe it's a product of Bruce's lack of expression, who knows. He certainly didn't respond Clark's attempted flirting at the event.

"You can stay at the manor tonight," says Bruce, "Alfred can pick you up from the police station."

And then he's gone.

So Clark spends the night at the manor.

***

Clark is having A Difficult Time. The flirting was... Probably a bad idea? All he knows is that he's been struggling to keep his thoughts PG, and his dreams last night were full of the tang of metal and the soft slip of bare skin against his.

Maybe it's too late. Maybe this is their dynamic now. Or maybe he's going to go downstairs and everything will be back to how it was before.

Somehow the second option feels worse.

He throws on yesterday's clothes and creeps down the hall. Jason and Bruce are seemingly still asleep–it isn't a school day, after all.

Alfred is in the kitchen, leaning on the counter and reading a newspaper. He glances up when Clark steps in but doesn't immediately move. It's obvious where Bruce got his unnaturally still poise.

"Good morning!"

"Good morning, master Kent. Did you sleep well?"

"I slept great!"

"I can bring you coffee in the conservatory; I'm told that sunlight would be a good addition to any meal for you."

"In the what?"

"The conservatory. The solarium. The three seasons room."

Clark stares.

"The room adjacent to the dining room. With the glass ceiling."

"Oh! The sunroom! Okay!"

Alfred winces imperceptibly. "I did say it had a glass ceiling."

"Alfred, I love you to pieces but your semantics are elitist."

Alfred looks at him. Alfred makes a broad gesture, as if to say, *look at where you are right now.*

Clark can only smile. "My point still stands. My parents didn't take out a mortgage to put me through college just so that I could be shamed for my architectural ignorance."

The old man nods, conceding the point, and turns toward the coffee pot.

Clark wanders off to the sunroom and pulls up the Wikipedia article titled 'Sunroom.'

***

"And *I'm* telling you, I don't think he could've made that jump without wires!"

There are voices approaching the kitchen. Jason and Bruce. Bruce's heart is as soothing as it was last night.

"Season four, episode eight contains a jump which required wires. They did a poor job of editing them out even then. A stunt man could make the season three jump without issue- thank you, Alfred."

Alfred murmurs something back, directing them to the solarium.

"You told me they shot it at location! You really think they let a real guy jump over that drop?"

"Thank Alfred for breakfast?"

"ThankyouAlfred- it would've killed the stuntman if he fell off!"

"There was no union for stuntmen back then, Jay. They were underpaid and overworked, so of course the-" Bruce stops dead in the entrance to the Solarium, staring at Clark. His pulse spikes. Jason almost runs into his back.

"You're still here." Says Bruce.

Clark stares right back, confused. "Was I supposed to leave..?"

"Why the fuck did you think Alfred gave me two breakfasts?" Jason pipes up, slipping past Bruce and sliding a plate in front of Clark.

"...You're a growing boy? Don't swear."

Jason shoves a whole fried egg into his mouth and then throws his hands in the air like he can't understand how stupid Bruce is.

"Did you sleep well." Bruce asks awkwardly.

"Yes! Your bed was very comfy!"

Jason chokes.

"This is why we don't take big bites," deadpans Bruce.

"S-sorry, I just didn't know. His bed?"

Clark stares for two beats before it hits him.

"No I meant! The bed in the guest room! The one that he owns! I was going to say 'your beds' but I didn't sleep in the other guest room I was in, just washing the blood off me, you know? So I had to say bed singular but that sounded like I was talking about his personal bed-"

Bruce's raised eyebrow makes him cough and shut himself up with a bite of food.

Jason watches the stuttering like he's watching a large man being mauled by a small duck, then finishes his bite and turns back to Bruce.

"So you're telling me that the film industry would just risk killing stuntmen? Couldn't they be sued or something for that?"

Bruce glances at Clark. He's oddly hesitant about continuing the conversation. "I- well, the stuntmen usually didn't have the the funds to sue if they got injured."

"So in season one, when the guys were fighting on the-"

"Jason, we should talk about something our guest can participate in" interrupts Bruce. His face is dusted a light pink and his heart rate has been picking up.

Clark says, "I don't mind. What are y'all talking about?"

Jason looks meaningfully at Bruce, who looks away. He rolls his eyes and turns back to Clark.

"The Grey Ghost! Have you seen it?"

Huh. An old kid's show. "Maybe an episode or two when I was younger, but I don't know much. Tell me more."

"Bruce has been showing it to me! Dick told me he gets really into it every few years, and this time he gets to talk about it with me!"

Bruce is staring blankly at his plate. His heart usually doesn't beat this fast outside of battle. Jason is obviously put off by his silence.

All Clark can do is put on his Listening Face and let himself smile enthusiastically.

"It was your inspiration, right?" Jason asks Bruce.

Very quietly, Bruce says, "yes."

Clark asks, "for Batman?"

Bruce looks up at him, calculating. Any other person might think it's a glare, But Clark knows that's just what he looks like when he's defensive.

"Yes." Says Bruce, more definitely.

"Well! I'll have to watch some of it when I get home, then. If you say it's good, I trust you!"

Bruce stabs a potato around his plate. "It's. Not necessarily *good* in a traditional way."

Jason is wearing a pinched, almost betrayed expression, looking over at Bruce.

Clark puts a concerned hand over Bruce's. He can hear the man's pulse skyrocket.

"Bruce. You're allowed to like things." He glances pointedly at Jason, who's picking at his food. "*Both* of you are allowed to like things. I would never look down on someone for what they enjoy."

Don't make Jason feel ashamed just because you do.

Bruce's eyes widen a little bit. "Right. I didn't mean. That."

"Could you two explain the premise to me?"

It's tense, at first, because Bruce is so… uncomfortable, about the whole thing. Jason picks up on it a bit, but with encouragement he's happy to describe plot points in sweeping detail. Clark insists that they don't spoil the big things, which makes Bruce stare at him inscrutably.

And once or twice, Bruce forgets himself and just starts *talking* . He has ideas, theories, factoids–obviously the product of hundreds of hours of focus—and he wants to share it.

It's pretty hot.

Chapter End Notes

Clark is a delightful man to write. I like to think he'd get a bit lost trying to read Public Bruce's body language.

Alfred is all of my lovable but slightly elitist middle class British relatives who get up at 5am (I have many).

Happy penultimate chapter! Hope you aren't expecting a huge climax, because the end is going to be like the rest of the fic: meandering, fluffy, neurodivergent, and slightly incoherent.

Not gonna lie, I've edited this fic so many times that I can't stand to look at it anymore. I can't wait to finish releasing it into the eco system so it never enters my brain again.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Clark knows Bruce functions best if he has a plan. Clark loves that about him.

Chapter Notes

There was going to be a full sex scene but everything I touch devolves into fluff, sorry

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Clark has to come back later that same day (or, night) because he left his dress clothes behind. Of course, he can't just go into Bruce's house without saying hi, he has to traipse down to the batcave and peek in (because he's hopeless).

Jason is asleep. Bruce is training. He's aiming a flurry of kicks at a punching bag, sweating through a thin sleeveless- *hold up that's the same shirt I wore the other day–*

Bruce looks up and sees him. His heartbeat, deceptively calm while exercising, suddenly kicks up a notch. Nonetheless, he saunters over to grab a water bottle and take a long swig.

It has to be purposeful, right? It has to be? The heartbeat, the way he's standing, the way he drinks water. Nobody stands or drinks like that normally, right? He has to intend for the light to catch the coiled muscles beneath the skin and the bob of his adam's apple.

Clark drifts closer. He can't help himself. He's been trying to flirt all week but Bruce just keeps upping the ante, making it more and more plausible that-

Well, there's only one way to find out, right?

Bruce usually chastises him for acting without thinking, but if Bruce had his way, nothing would get done in time because of all that thinking.

When Clark is a foot away, he stops. Bruce is staring at him again, with a hammering heart and an unreadable face. Clark can see his whole chest from the way the shirt clings to him. It probably wouldn't cling to him like that if Clark hadn't stretched it out days ago. *Couldn't Bruce just get a shirt I hadn't worn?*

But Bruce probably has at least two dozen other shirts that Clark hasn't worn. It's something else, isn't it.

Bruce breathes. His eyes flick between Clark's eyes. Their faces are close. *Something else.*

And then… standstill. Clark can't bring himself to move any further without some sort of signal. He can't bear to step away.

Just. A couple of inches between what he has and what he wants.

***

Bruce is Absolutely Fucking Lost in social cues. He has no goddamn clue what is going on right now. Or rather, he thinks he knows exactly what is going on but jumping to conclusions could lead to catastrophic results. So he's stalling with anxiety.

But then, on the other hand… he trusts Clark. He trusts Clark more than anyone. He trusts Clark to communicate honestly.

So he takes a dive.

"What are you doing."

Clark hesitantly meets his eyes. There's something almost scared in his expression. "Something…. Romantic?"

Something romantic, you were right, let's shut down the brain in celebration!

Bruce struggles to focus.

"Be more specific. What is this 'something.'"

Clark lets out a breath, almost like a gasp. He's closer now. "you *do* feel the same."

"I... presumably, yes."

Clark kisses him.

Clark's lips are soft where Bruce's are chapped, his tongue is soft where Bruce's is dry, his hands are soft where Bruce's are calloused. Every part of him is a balm against the pains of the world.

They stand there, intertwined, falling into the slow push and pull of kissing. It's everything. It's *everything*, and Clark *wants* him, and Bruce is lost in the softness and the warmth.

Eventually, they break apart.

Clark is breathless and bright-eyed. His hands are still around Bruce's waist.

"Ah, right. I, um, we should probably, talk about feelings?"

Bruce can't keep the dread out of his expression, but he answers, "yes."

"You obviously don't want to talk about your feelings.” Clark thinks for a moment (his hands are still around Bruce, it's so *distracting,*) “and I don't need you to. I just need... mission parameters. Tell me what you want us to be doing and we'll build a short term plan."

And oh, *that's* easy. Building a plan with Clark is familiar, and this time there'll be a lot more listening and a lot less arguing.

Maybe Bruce likes the arguing too. Maybe he's weird like that.

Clark is listening (and standing so close, Bruce can smell the straw), so he speaks: "I would like. To kiss you. And then I want to. Hm. How short term is this short term plan."

"How short term do you want it to be?"

"You're leaving me too much leeway. I need parameters."

"I was thinking a specific plan for the next hour, maybe for the rest of the night, and then after that we could… we could come up with a more long term plan, if that’s something you’re interested in..."

A more long term plan ,

“I am *very* interested, Clark”

“..ah.” Clark’s throat works. He licks his lips. Bruce can’t be bothered to stop staring at those lips.

Bruce manages, "I would like to kiss you. More. For the next hour. Maybe longer. It would be nice to-" he racks his brain for the things he wished he could have done, but they're all such small changes because their relationship is perfect already, isn't it "-to analyse the samples I took on our last mission, with you sitting next to me. I want more, too, but I'm- I can't think of anything that I want more than to just have you here."

Clark nods.

"What do you want, Clark?" Bruce puts his arms around Clark's neck, and Clark looks back with- with a *hungry* expression,

He opens his mouth, he blushes, he closes his mouth. "I don't- you're wonderful and so thoughtful and you want us to just be together like before, that's- me too."

"What else?"

"I- no, it's fine, that-"

"Tell me what you want." Bruce growls.

Clark blushes further at the tone. "Well I was hoping we'd kiss for a bit, and I could help you with some casework, maybe, and... and later maybe you'd push me up against a wall with- with a leg between my thighs and I'd take off your uniform with my teeth and, um, you'd tell me exactly what you want me to do to you."

There's a pause. Bruce's brain stalls for long enough for Clark to look worried.

"That. Sounds like a good idea." His underwear feels two sizes too tight. He really didn't expect flustered Clark Kent to be so-

Huh.

Clark leans in towards him, radiating anxiety but barreling on. "I want to kiss you and also I want to have sex right here on the floor of the batcave but it seems a bit early for that and I'm worried someone would walk in and and also it seems like doing science together might be more interesting to you? So I don't want you to get the wrong idea, I like science too, but I figured that the science would be a given-"

"Both can be important. I'm not asexual, Clark." Bruce is a little breathless. He wants to see how far down Clark's blush goes. Clark is smiling earnestly, with funny bright eyes and soft curls like a coffee coloured crown.

When Bruce leans in for the next kiss, he's very careful not to let his lips betray how *hungry* he is suddenly, because it seems almost distasteful to be this hungry. But Clark angles deeper into kissing, running his hands up under Bruce's shirt and leaning forward, and fuck, there's *want* in every movement. Has he always had this much want in him?

It takes them even longer to break away this time.

"I want," says Clark, "to be yours for as long as you'll have me."

“yes.” Bruce tries to dive back in, but Clark stops him.

“Wait, I- if we're going to go any further, I want to know what you want. In the long run.” He runs a finger over the buttons Bruce had been undoing on his shirt.

“I *do* want things,” Bruce says,

“Would you want to be in a relationship?" Clark looks anxious and twitchy, "Because I really struggle to… well, I need clear boundaries for things. And that’s something I really want.”

Bruce’s brain feels like soup. He doesn’t have a good track record with relationships. Self expression is difficult. He keeps getting distracted by those… ideas Clark was bringing up. “I… I am happy to... make commitments. To you. For you.”

Clark kisses him again, deep and sweet and dark like coffee.

Then he pulls Bruce over to the computer, fishes out his work laptop, sits on Bruce's desk. Bruce is pulled into the desk chair and finds Clark's legs casually draped around him.

Clark says, “Okay. It’s a mission plan, right? What commitments do you want to make? What are the overall goals of this mission?”

Clark knows Bruce functions best if he has a plan. Clark loves that about him.

So they sit facing each other at the desk and they make a mission plan for a relationship. There are sub-plans and contingency plans, and eventually the overall shape of the thing branches so many times they start colour coding it. Clark links things to external sources. They establish code words, ground rules, protocols for backing out at any time. It seems presumptuous to aim for more than a year, they agree. (Bruce has the rough draft of a ten year plan secreted away on his computer before the night is out. He’s completely hopeless. Head over heels. Clark has so much to give and wants to give it to *him*.)

They talk, long into the night.

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Bruce wakes up in bed and wonders if it was all a dream.

He checks his phone.

You fell asleep at the computer and I have work, says a message from Clark at 7am. Then, *you seemed a little loopy at the end there, let me know if there’s anything you’d like to change about the document*

Right. The Document.

Bruce opens The Document.

Bruce closes The Document.

It's the stupidest thing he's ever heard of.

It's probably the sexiest thing someone has ever done for him, and people have done a *lot* of sexy things for him.

If he bothers to do some introspection, he notices that he doesn't have anxiety about Clark anymore. At all. Because they wrote up The Document. He knows exactly what Clark wants, down to decimal places with margins of error. Clark drew up *diagrams* for him. And Bruce told Clark exactly what he wants. There's no mystery anymore.

In the past he may have liked mystery, but Clark's presence is warm and reassuring and Bruce is so. Anxious. All the time. Apparently after he fell asleep, Clark created a chart titled "[needs input] timeline of publicity" and it includes waiting "indefinitely" to tell the League ANYTHING. He really *does* know Bruce better than anyone else.

It's 3pm. Bruce is just reading and rereading the things they wrote last night. Some of Clark's writing feels- it feels more like love poetry than planning. Then again, Clark is good at writing. Apparently he just had that many feelings in him, this whole time.

Bruce keeps going back over it like the words will help him connect the exhausted jumble of last night with the calm, sunny afternoon.

It was real, right? It has to be real?

Alfred is picking Jason up from school, so the house is empty. Bruce snags himself a smoothie from the kitchen and scuttles back to his room to get fully dressed.

He winds up rereading the document again instead.

Clark made all sorts of irrelevant annotations to unrelated parts of the plan, all written after Bruce fell asleep.

I know this great cannoli place in metropolis, says one.

I think my parents would love you but Alfred might make them anxious, says another

And,

I love that you love things. I hope you'll show me the grey ghost sometime.

And,

I haven't been able to stop thinking about touching you

He was worried, after the other day, that Clark would start treating him like someone who couldn't enjoy mature things. Bruce has lots of interests and many of them could be described as "sexy." Then there's other ones, like data analysis, that most people prefer to ignore. And there's the Grey Ghost.

Clark has seen all of them, and didn't even blink. He didn't stop thinking of Bruce as competent because of a children's show. He also didn't stop thinking of Bruce as… touchable.

There's a knock on the door. Bruce closes his laptop and checks the time. 3:30. Alfred is probably home, and checking on-

It's Clark who's standing in the hall, a little bit windswept and very rumpled.

Clark looks surprised, then goes a little bit pink, his gaze trawls along the sliver of Bruce's chest visible under the robe. He swallows and opens his mouth, but he doesn't say anything. His eyes run down the length of Bruce's legs instead. It's not a long robe and Bruce is only wearing boxer briefs underneath. There's a lot of skin for Clark to ogle.

It's rude to pull someone into a kiss without saying hello first.

"Hello" says Bruce.

Clark reaches out and traces the length of a scar on Bruce's chest. "Have I told you that you're beautiful?"

He was rude first. Go for it.

Bruce grabs Clark bodily by the collar and hauls him through the door, kicking it closed and pushing him against the wall. Clark's glasses fall off somewhere but Clark doesn't really seem to mind, his head is following Bruce's tugging hands, leaning down to meet his lips. Bruce presses closer, flush against the taller frame, and runs a hand along Clark's belt (damn, his shirt is still tucked in),

Clark leans his head further forward to push Bruce just a little away, making room for those broad hands to undo the buttons of his shirt…

It's a lot of bare skin. Bruce pushes closer to nibble the length of Clark's neck and let his hands wander across Clark's sides and up his back.

"Y-y'know," mutters Clark with an audible smile, "somehow I didn't expect you to be this bossy. I don't know why."

Bruce stops biting and stares worriedly into Clark's neck. "Sorry, would you prefer me to-"

"Hey I didn't say you could stop!"

They both stare blankly ahead.

"I mean- I didn't say you *should* stop, not that, you're obviously allowed to…" Clark stammers.

"No no, let's go back to the part where you're giving orders?"

Clark is blushing *hard,* but to his credit he only takes a few seconds to rally.

"I- I can," he says, and picks Bruce up like he weighs nothing.

Bruce was not expecting that. He also isn't expecting it when Clark drops him on the bed, or when Clark shrugs off the open shirt. He isn't expecting Clark to lean over him with a hungry smile and a raised eyebrow. The man is shaped like a god. His chest overshadows most of the rest of his torso from this angle. It's very round...

"Do you *want* me to give you orders?" Clark is saying.

Bruce isn't paying attention. He reaches out and squeezes Clark's pecs.

They *are* soft, with just a little hair.

Clark's eyebrows go up. He bites his lip. The man is extremely distractible, isn't he. *But again, he's always been easy to fluster,*

Bruce props himself up and Clark follows him upright until he's essentially in Bruce's lap, then he leans across and brings a nipple into his mouth.

He's met with a gasp and a hand clutching his hair. Clark arches his spine and–holy *fuck* the man is emotive–lets out a breathy moan.

Bruce uses his legs to lever Clark onto his back.

Clark's eyes are wide and his dimpled mouth looks delicious. "You really weren't kidding about jiu jiutsu teaching you about lev-ah~"

It's never been this easy to shut him up before. A second ago, Clark was pulling off 'intimidating' pretty well. Now he's babbling and frazzled from just a few touches.

There's probably a science to how many touches Bruce can get it down to.

"May I?" Asks Bruce, gesturing to Clark's remaining clothing. He's met with an enthusiastic nod.

In a few seconds, they're both naked–he has to stop to take it in. Clark is laid out in *his* bed, looking up at him like he's the most beautiful man in the world, like there's nobody he'd rather be there with. It's a lot.

"Are you okay?" Clark asks, when Bruce lays on top of him. He bucks his hips a little in a preoccupied sort of way.

Bruce nods and hugs him close.

"Are you sure?" Clark asks, putting his hand on the small of Bruce's back. Bruce can feel his heartbeat.

"I just care about you. A lot."

Clark pulls him in for a soft kiss. A sweet kiss. There's that smile that he had at the dance, the one that makes Bruce feel like the luckiest man alive. There goes the tilt of the chin, and those damn fingertips, unspooling Bruce beneath their careful touch.

This is what love tastes like.

Bruce learns something over the next few weeks. He learns that Clark's *want* doesn't go away.

Most people have ebbs and flows in affection, or their attention only reaches so far, but Clark seems to always be *there* , a reassuring presence with a thousand small devotions. He *touches* Bruce constantly. He kisses the back of his neck when he's working in the cave. He always asks if it's okay that he's being this touchy or if Bruce wants more alone time, but it's *nice* to have those little reminders that Bruce is loved, he isn't alone, the things he has to say are important.

He would never wish Clark smaller. Every inch of him is perfect.

On Monday, they start watching The Grey Ghost together. On Tuesday, Clark catches a drug ring through data analysis. On Wednesday, Bruce makes Clark a batarang he can't wear down. On Thursday, they save the world.

Every day, they make little tweaks and edits to their mission plan. They debrief. They argue. They kiss.

And in public, no matter what masks they're wearing, they have each other's backs.

Chapter End Notes

You KNOW Bruce would prefer to make a fuckass long mission plan instead of setting traditional relationship boundaries. Clark loves this neurotic little man.

Thanks for sticking with me through this! Again, you can follow me on Tumblr where I'll be posting some Gotham by Gaslight comics/art.

I may write more fanfics but I'm neurotic as hell about never posting unfinished WIPs, so I promise you won't hear from me anytime within the next two months at least. Maybe I'll never post again. Maybe I'll be back in two months with a terribly written Gotham Zoo fic. No promises either way.

Take your soup and get out into the world!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!